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DIVERTING STORIES OF CLERICAL LIFE

BY THE REV.

E. W. LEACHMAN

Author of

'The Church's Object Lessons

'St Peter's, Bournemouth'

'Hands of Prayer'

etc.



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PREFACE

THE foreword shall be brief.

First of all, this book is frankly written to amuse. It may not be without its value as a bit of War work, if it brings the sunshine of a hearty laugh at such a time of stress and gloom.

It would have been possible to produce a work of fiction on similar lines, but the author has preferred to record only such incidents as he can vouch for.

None of these stories has appeared in print before, though, naturally, some of them have been told in conversation on more than one occasion. The writer has a vivid recollection of a venerable Canon, who once took him aside and related, as a particularly good joke, the story of *The Bookmarker* (p. 43); having completely forgotten that the very man to whom he was recounting it had first told it him as a personal experience a few years before.

The author's original intention was to launch this book anonymously, bearing the title of "Those Choir-boys, by the Precentor," which accounts for the form in which it is cast, but he has been prevailed upon to let it sail under another flag.

E. W. L.

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DIVERTING STORIES OF CLERICAL LIFE

CHAPTER I

THOSE DREADFUL CHOIR-BOYS

“THOSE dreadful choir-boys!” Who hasn’t heard that moan? But surely not many use the expression with any lasting bitterness in their hearts! A sort of half-apology generally lurks behind the words, and as a rule they are followed by: “Well, I suppose boys will be boys!”

There is no justification for the opinion that choir-boys are always the worst boys in the parish. The truth is that they are like all other boys, neither better nor worse; only they have, perhaps, more chances of getting into mischief, and they can the oftener combine together in their spare time.

If the choristers are a real trouble in any place, it is usually the fault of the one who has charge of them. Wherever children are gathered together, in a school, a class, a society, a guild, a choir, or what not, the responsibility for their discipline and good behaviour rests with those who have their control, and the youngsters are more often than not blamed for the delinquencies of those who are set over them, but who are no good at their job.

Then, think of the effect of the odd people who in so many places surround the choir-boys of a

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church—quaint clergy, organists, church officers, and ladies ; to say nothing of the ordinary glum and depressing members of the congregation !

It is nearly forty years since I first became a chorister myself, but how well I remember, as a timid little chap, one cold and frosty Sunday afternoon, being engaged in nothing more terrible than racing another nipper through the close, to keep myself warm, on the way to Evensong ; when from the steps of the porch of the great church, as we passed, came a stern voice calling on us to stop ; while a tall stranger removed the coils of a huge comforter from his hard old mouth and said, with the utmost solemnity and severity :

“ You should neither work nor play,
Because it is the Sabbath Day.”

O ! we walked the rest of the way to the vestry, quiet and penitent enough, being terrified lest that dreadful old man should report us for a serious misdemeanour—and he looked as if it would have completed the happiness of his wretched Sunday to do so.

Miserable old man ! I’ve come across many of his sort since then. A pretty set of boys he’d have produced if he had had the looking after of a choir !

Who will venture to throw stones at the lads in the choir-stalls, when so often the example set them by individuals in the pews is not above reproach ? What do you think of this, for instance ?

An old friend—a much revered churchwarden—

told me the incident only the other day. He and the dear lady concerned would have been quite ready to pounce upon any unfortunate choir-boy who might inadvertently have committed a like offence, but because it was the respected warden himself who made the slip, nothing further was said about the matter, of course.

That Sunday morning my friend's wife had been unable to accompany him owing to a bad cold ; so, when a lady of obvious importance entered the church and asked for a seat, the leading layman present bowed her into his own pew.

During the singing of a favourite hymn, which the churchwarden himself was joining in heartily, his hand fell naturally into the side pocket of his coat, where he felt the accustomed soft-covered hymn-book his spouse usually dropped into that receptacle on her way to church. Mechanically he took this out, and, without looking up from his own book, passed it to his wife—or, rather, to the stranger who occupied her seat next to him that morning.

Picture his consternation when he heard a quiet voice by his side asking : “ What would you like me to do with this ? ” And, glancing towards the speaker, he found that he had unconsciously handed the amused visitor *a packet of “ Country Life ” tobacco !*

How would you estimate, again, the effect of such an incident as the following upon the morals of a chorister ?

I was a lad in my early teens, in daily dread

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of the inevitable "breaking" of my voice, which would mean the end of a happy choir-boy's career.

On a perfect Sunday in June the congregation were walking slowly away from the church after a beautiful morning Service. Just ahead of me was a gentleman with his sweet little girl of between two and three years old. I knew them both by sight, for they attended the Services regularly, though the child came more often with her mother than her father. About once a fortnight seemed to be the most he could endure of church ; and I think I had never before noticed him there with the child alone.

Evidently the little girl was tired, for she looked up at her father and asked if he would carry her. Down he bent at once to take her up in his arms, and in doing so he let fall his Prayer Book. As he walked on, I ran forward to pick up the book. It lay on the ground open, and in stooping to reach it I was struck with the strange appearance of the pages. No part of the Prayer Book, so far as I knew, looked quite like that, so my inquisitiveness led me to turn over the leaves, only to find that they were all similar.

How curious ! What could this book be that had been brought to church obviously by mistake ? I referred to the title-page, where I saw that the volume was some kind of betting guide, containing the pedigrees of all the famous race-horses of the day. Then I closed the book, simply to find, to my amazement, that it was, after all, bound in a

Prayer Book cover of expensive morocco, with an elaborate cross stamped in gold upon it !

I hurried after the gentleman (!) and handed him his book, which he took with rather curt thanks. Years after, I found that his one great passion was horse-racing ; so that even in God's House during the prayers he was busy working out the chances of the horses that were running that week.

A champion hypocrite ! yet that man was very likely one of those who on occasion complained most bitterly of " those dreadful choir-boys."

What of the effect on the choristers, too, of the antics of the queer, cracky people you sometimes get about a church ? They may be harmless, so far as any fear of bodily danger from them is concerned ; but choir-boys—like all other children—are gifted by nature with a wonderful sense of humour and a faculty of imitation. How can you blame them, then, if occasionally they are upset by, and even try to copy, the weird behaviour of the oddities around them ?

Evensong was about to begin one week-day : the organist had started the voluntary, and the choristers stood ready to proceed into church, when the vestry door opened, and there stepped briskly into the midst of us about the quaintest figure that had ever been seen there. It was a gentleman arrayed in a costly garb, which breathed of the racecourse from head to foot—a loud check suit, patent-leather boots, white spats, and a light bowler hat. He held a saucy little cane jauntily in his right hand with his hat, while his left hand

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rested upon a case of handsome field-glasses hanging at his side.

We all stood in dumb bewilderment, while our unannounced visitor greeted us generally with : " Good evening, all of you ! I've heard a great deal of your singing in this famous and beautiful church, and to-day I am attending Evensong in person. But I am anxious not to cause you any kind of embarrassment by being present ; that's why I've come to warn you. I shall not sit in a conspicuous seat. Indeed, I shall place myself as far back as possible, in the great west tower. All the same, I shall be following every movement of yours through these very excellent glasses. So beware ! Nothing will escape me. May I have your permission to enter the church this way ? Thank you ! "

And before even the priest in charge could get his breath, the lunatic was gone through the inner door—out of which we had to follow him the next minute.

What kind of concentration of thought or devotion could you expect after such an apparition ? How could any of us keep from looking furtively down into that distant tower, where, like two cat's eyes in the dark, we caught glimpses of the lenses of those field-glasses fixed on us whenever they reflected the lights in the church ? Or how could you possibly blame any boy for whispering during the Lessons and prayers that evening ?

Then there was an old lady, cracky enough to need a maid always in attendance upon her, but

who yet was allowed to disturb the faithful in church, especially at the daily Services, and particularly at the Litany, which we sang on Wednesdays and Fridays. She would plant herself as near the choir as she could, and just howl the responses for all she was worth, not to the right music, but to a screechy tune all her own, soaring right away up to the heavens, and each time lingering and quivering on after everyone else had finished.

It was cruelty to any set of choir-boys to expect them to remain serious under such provocation, and eventually the Precentor went and expostulated ; so the old dear was kept from attending the Services any more. But I've no doubt that parson has been considered autocratic and unchristian ever since.

Another lady, who was the bane of my life for months when I had advanced from chorister to precentor, also disturbed the choir-boys to such an extent that some ghastly mistake in the music was bound to occur, simply because attention was fixed on this quaint person, who proved much more interesting for the time being.

When the lady put in an appearance at the Sung Eucharist she would come up through the choir last of those who were communicating. Her peculiar head-gear was enough in itself to attract everyone's attention ; and, as I approached her at the altar rails the first time she came, I noticed that she appeared very agitated. Before I could utter a word she had thrust her hand into her dress,

as she knelt there, and produced a soft white packet, which she presented to me, begging in a most pleading tone : " Take this ; take this, I beseech you ! "

Probably no one but myself heard these words, but certainly all the choir who were in sight of the lady could see that she was doing something decidedly out of the ordinary in talking at that moment, and making some kind of offering. To the organist and the congregation, of course, there seemed no explanation why the singing was going all wrong at the most important part of the Service ; yet who could blame the fascinated choir-boys ?

Having both my hands engaged just then, it was difficult to take the offered packet, but I managed it with some disengaged fingers, and I placed the thing on the nearest seat in the *Sedilia* close by. To my astonishment the dear soul immediately reached over the brass altar rail, pushed me aside, seized the packet, returned it to her jacket, and departed.

Seeing the lady was a complete stranger, there was afterwards a discussion amongst the clergy as to what was in that packet, and why she had brought it there. The rector was of opinion she was some devout person, who probably wished to make a special gift to the church—" perhaps a cheque for £1,000," as he put it—and who, for sentimental reasons, selected the most sacred moment to make her presentation. So she had taken back her valuable offering when she found it merely laid aside with apparent indifference.

It was therefore resolved that if she came again under similar circumstances, whoever was ministering to her should retain her packet.

About three weeks later, I was singing that Service again, and the mysterious lady once more appeared, going through exactly the same performance ; but with rather more disastrous effect upon the choir-boys, who were eagerly awaiting developments, instead of attending to their singing. This time I took the small parcel and placed it up my sleeve.

The Service proceeded. No doubt the choir-boys were a bit disappointed that nothing more exciting happened. As they settled down quietly to their singing, I fear my own thoughts were sadly disturbed and wandering. What was it I had in my sleeve—a thousand pounds, or—what ?

At last the Service was over, and I lost little time in opening that precious packet. It contained . . . just a note ! And a queer note at that. It was a startling communication, addressed to me personally, telling how a dastardly plot had been hatched against my life, and warning me that on the very first occasion I ventured to preach in that church again, so surely as I entered the pulpit, a shot would be fired at me, and I should be killed on the spot. Why, it didn't appear ; though there was an evident sincerity and anxiety about the letter. It couldn't be meant as a hoax, coming from such an elderly and apparently devout soul ; so the only other explanation was that it was the hallucination of a poor diseased brain.

This it turned out to be, because I got many other letters containing the same warning; and the Sacristan of the church also received bribes of gold watches and valuable jewels, to plead with me, and to endeavour to buy off my supposed assassin. In the end, the poor lady had to be put away, but her stay amongst us was distinctly distracting, especially to the choristers.

This experience brings to mind another, connected with an eccentric gentleman—not by any means “cracky”; only very deaf, and forgetful of the effect of his endeavour to hear better. He always sat as near the pulpit as possible, and therefore in full view of the choir-boys. All was serene, so long as he made use of his ordinary ear-trumpet, but there came a day when he invested in some brand new electric apparatus, which had a part he banded round his head, clamping a receiver on to one ear, and another sort of telephone attachment, which at times he held to his second ear; while in his breast pocket resided apparently a triple-expansion battery, which seemed to need constant changing to higher or lower gears—at least that is what the choristers imagined, from a diligent survey of its repeated use.

It was when the whole machinery was set running at top speed that we got the full benefit of this invention. It cracked, and bubbled, and whistled, and kicked, and popped, and purred. There must have been mysterious stops, which the good man pressed for all the changes in the list of musical terms of expression; for we got *pp*, *mf*, *forte*,

ff, *dim.*, *cres.*, *fz*, *sf*, *rit.*, and a whole host of others.

No doubt the dear gentleman was sublimely unconscious of the row his instrument was making, or the disturbance he was causing. Yet the choir-boys were expected to appear as oblivious of the whole affair as he was himself, and to go on with their singing and irreproachable behaviour, as though no sound but that of their own sweet voices smote the air. "Those dreadful choir-boys!" Precisely! But what of those dreadful eccentrics also?

Yes! and there were those sweet old ladies—not cracky, nor even eccentric, but just anxious to show their sympathy, and to take their part in a good work during the delivery of the National Mission Message at the end of 1916.

A special feature of that endeavour in one of the parishes to which I was then sent was a Procession of Witness, which started from the parish church at the wealthy and fashionable end of the district, and continued its way down to the slummy parts, where stations were made, and prayers offered.

The whole congregation was invited to take part in this Procession—at least, all who were free to do so; for it had to be in the afternoon, because of the restriction of lights at night during that awful time of War.

The response to this particular appeal was encouraging: everyone took up the suggestion with fervour—so much so, that one devout member of the congregation was greatly distressed because

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her age and infirmity made it impossible for her to join in such an outdoor Service. "But could she—would it be possible for her to—might she be pardoned for venturing to make the suggestion that she should—*come in a cab?*" Who could resist such pleading? In a thoughtless moment the benign vicar said, "Yes!" and dismissed the matter from his mind.

Therefore, on the fateful day the Procession, of goodly proportions, was duly marshalled, and we all set out, headed by the Cross; and brought up in the rear by—Heaven defend us!—by *five cabs*, ancient alike in construction, in horse-power, in Jehus, and in contents.

That sweet old lady had whispered of her privilege to other kindred souls, who, in the innocence of their guileless hearts, came also in like manner! It was too late then to refuse them, so we went forward and hoped for the best.

All passed off well, till we reached our first halting-place—a poor street which formed a *cul de sac*. There the Procession turned upon itself so as to group round the Cross; and as it began to do this the rearguard of cabs appeared, turning the corner. Like lightning one of the smaller boys passed the word audibly: "Look! Here come the TANKS!"

I can only answer for my own inward feelings during the rest of that Procession: they were surging to and fro like a troubled sea. In fact I think the boys themselves had more right than I to a commendation for bravery under provocation.

And who was to blame for that unfortunate *contre-temps*? Most decidedly not that "dreadful choir-boy" who made the only brilliant remark of the afternoon.

That recalls another outdoor Procession, which, with the best intentions in the world, ended precious near a fiasco, because of a little want of judgment. And again the poor choir-boys came in for all the blame.

This time it was far from the region of slums and cabs, and long before the War or the National Mission. At a delightful little country village in glorious Devon I had been asked to preach at a Harvest Festival; and great preparations had been made for the keeping of this Feast of "St Mangold and All Wurzels."

The rector told me afterwards that he had lived in the place for less than a year, having been appointed to that country parish after a breakdown through overwork in a great city. He was but gradually becoming accustomed to country life.

Shortly after his arrival, at the beginning of the previous winter, the new parson received a deputation soliciting his subscription and interest in the matter of starting a village band! The prospect was grim, but the thing itself might tend to promote fellowship amongst the men, and to provide a common interest for the winter evenings; so he headed the list, lent the school-room for practices, and settled down to endure those early and noisy steps which lie along the road to musical skill.

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The progress made by the stolid, patient, and persistent bandsmen was excellent, and by the summer a very creditable performance of simple waltzes, polkas, and what not was forthcoming upon the village green.

Then occurred the unexpected and the terrifying. That same deputation waited once more upon the rector, with a request that made his blood run cold and hot in turn. "Could the band be permitted, on account of its acknowledged achievements, to accompany the singing in church at the Harvest Festival?"

"Gee whiz!" as our American friends say, had it come to that? But there seemed to be no escape; so the rector compromised by suggesting that the band, as a first endeavour, should accompany three of the hymns, which offer was accepted with alacrity; and the padre then and there chose the three simplest hymns he could think of.

Weeks before the event itself the villagers learnt, by the sounds issuing from the school on the nights of rehearsal, what part of their Thanksgiving was to consist of!

At last the day came, and I arrived with it: so did many of the clergy from the surrounding parishes; for it was a custom on those occasions to pay a brotherly call, and take part in the rejoicing—all exactly as it should be.

But in the little church of that particular village the vestry was so tiny—having been built in the days when only the parson himself had to be

provided for : such things as surpliced choirs never having been dreamt of—that the addition of half a dozen bulky clergy made it necessary to find some other place for robing.

A happy thought suggested the dining-room of the rectory, which was commodious, though a quarter of a mile from the church. The only risk was that of a wet evening, but it turned out to be a glorious autumn day ; so all went well, till we came out of the rectory to walk quietly to the church. Then it was that a huge surprise was sprung upon us : the village band was waiting at the rectory gate—with steam well up ! At the head of the procession it marched, and it played the *War March of the Priests*—a choice which won lasting fame for the bandmaster.

So far, so good ; nothing was amiss ; everyone was in the best of spirits, and some not a little proud. But this *War March* is not an endless affair, though there is no law against repeating it, if it doesn't happen to last long enough at any time. Still, that alternative never occurred to the conductor there ; so, when, a few hundred yards from the church, the *Priests' March* gave out, a hurried consultation amongst the performers resulted in their striking up the only other march they knew, which, as luck would have it, was *Tommy Atkins* ! This was fairly under way as the band lined up in the porch ; and the white-robed choir and clergy passed into the church to these immortal strains !

Now, do you think it was fair to jacket those

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unfortunate, simple country choir-boys for their disgraceful behaviour in entering church, all with faces as red as beetroots, and many convulsed with laughter? Poor lads! I wonder if this record will meet the eye of any of them, now grown to man's estate! I expect the story will be imperishable in that delightful village.

And GOD—to whom all Services are offered—how must it have appeared to Him? May we dare to ask such a question?

I only venture to do so here, because it recalls one of the most charmingly childlike things my own daughter ever said, when she was a little mite. "Daddy," she asked, as she sat on my knee saying good-night, "do you think God can understand a joke?"

"What do you mean, my darling?" I questioned in amazement.

"Only that, daddy dear," she replied. "Do you think He really can understand a joke?"

"But why do you ask such a funny question?" I persisted, being utterly mystified as to what she could possibly have at the back of her mind.

"Why, because I told Him an awfully good one in my prayers this morning, daddy: and I do hope He understood it."

Dear heart of an innocent child, who could tell even her jokes to God! I expect He did understand; as no doubt He does anything that is innocent and harmless; though we

ourselves often look glum and severe enough over it, eh?

To be a choir-boy was the first ambition I have any recollection of, back in the old days, when I was taken to church by my parents as a little chap of five or six. And the reason for this keen desire was not the glamour of wearing a white surplice, and being the beheld of all beholders; because in that severe old church the parson preached in a black gown, and the choristers, with the organ, were perched up in an ugly gallery behind us.

Apart from the really excellent singing of the choir, which even then sent a thrill through me—particularly when they sang a special Service, or an anthem—it was, I think, the air of mystery about that gallery and organ that so fascinated me. My little head was constantly turning round to see who were up there, and what they were doing.

How I ached to go on a voyage of discovery up those mysterious steps that curled round into the darkness, just inside the door as we entered and left the church! It was up those stone stairs I had seen the choir-boys disappearing.

But the thing which completely mesmerised me was the looking-glass fixed just above the head of the organist, at an angle which allowed him, by a mere upward glance, to see what the parson was doing right away at the other end of the church.

In answer to multitudes of questions I discovered

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that the organist himself merely pressed the notes, and stops, and things ; but that, before any sound came out of the big pipes I could see, a mighty pair of bellows had to be blown by a strong man somewhere inside the organ.

That was mystery for a small boy if you like. What sort of man was this blowing man ? Were his bellows anything like those in the blacksmith's shop ? How did he know when they wanted him to blow ? How did he get into the organ—had he to crawl through a hole, like a dog getting into his kennel, or did he go up a ladder, or in at some little door ? What part of the organ was he in when he got there—top, bottom, middle, right or left ? Had he a light inside there in the dark, and could he see out at all, through the pipes, or through any chinks ?

So I puzzled on, after I had first seen and heard that wonderful organ ; but the mystery about the blower was apparently explained when, after a while, I caught sight of the looking-glass. I hadn't the faintest idea that it was a looking-glass, else it wouldn't have possessed such an entrancing interest for me. I imagined it was just a hole in the organ, through which that blowing-man inside might look out, to get his directions from the organist, and to see us all in the church.

This was obvious to me, because it seemed as if I so constantly caught the man peeping out of his hole. What I really saw was the organist's face, when he happened to glance up at his mirror,

of course. From our pew, near the front of the church, it appeared exactly as if someone inside the organ were looking out.

And whenever my blower-man peeped down, he was staring straight at me. There were times when I longed to give him a nod of recognition, but I judged it wiser not to start that; for, even as it was, my people were for ever nudging and whispering to me to turn my head round the right way, and pay attention to what the parson was saying; though he wasn't in the very least interesting, compared with my blowing friend upstairs, looking out of his hole in the organ.

How I longed to be one of the choir-boys! up there quite close to the organ, and the organist, and the bellows-man—up those dark, mysterious stairs; and able, not only to take part in the special bits of singing, which sounded so much more interesting than the ordinary things that everybody else in the church joined in—and which so many round me sang all wrong, and out of tune; but also to look down and see the people from behind, and spot what they were all up to, when they were supposed to be quite still and doing nothing (the only idea of “worship” in other minds than children's, by the by); for I confess that it was the thought of those watching eyes up in the gallery at the back, more than anything else, that kept my own active little body comparatively still during the long, tedious Services.

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Yes ! I longed to be a choir-boy. And there came a day when that longing burst all bounds, so that I made open confession of it at home, with no little fear and trembling at my own audacity. I shall never forget that day, because, though it shocked me greatly at first, to think that anything so dreadful as I had seen could take place in that awesome church ; yet there was a delicious spice of wickedness about it, which appealed to me with such overwhelming force at the time, that I longed all the more intensely to be nearer my bold, bad blowing-man. This is what happened :

It fell on a day that the gentleman who acted as " Leader of the Choir "—an officer I have never come across in any other place—was married, and my father wished to be present at the wedding of one of the most esteemed of our church workers.

When I discovered that there was to be an elaborate Service, I gave no one any peace till the word had gone forth that I also might attend the function.

It was my first appearance at a wedding, so there was much to fascinate me, especially as there were more elaborate decorations and fancy dresses than I ever saw in the church, even on its greatest Festival days.

The choir were there in full force, with monstrous buttonholes, and beaming faces. So was my blowing-man, with a countenance that wore a radiant smile I had not seen there on Sundays.

I don't wonder at that, because at ordinary Services there was certainly nothing that ever tempted even me to smile—though it took very little as a rule to do that. But this wedding-day that face kept bobbing up at the hole almost every second, all wreathed in smiles; so that I could only with difficulty keep my eyes off it; and, though I wasn't by any means the most important person there that day, it seemed to me more than ever that the blow-man was trying every time to catch my eye.

After a very elaborate performance, and a lot of mysterious mumbling, the bride and bridegroom disappeared, with the parson and a number of the best-dressed people, into the vestry; and, while they were gone, the choir sang a ripping anthem thing, which kept my eyes glued up at the back all the time. Then there was a commotion in the church, and all the people came out of the vestry arm in arm, just as the organist began a livelier march tune than I'd heard him play before.

Round went my head, to see whether the player had to pull out lots of stops for that sort of thing, and——!! Could I believe my eyes? At that very moment the blowing-man looked out of his hole, just bursting with laughter; and he was certainly looking at me—there could be no doubt about it this time. Only——no, it *couldn't* be true! Yet, by all that was funny, it *was* true! He deliberately put his right thumb to his nose, and opened his hand at me!

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Heavens ! And they'd made me sit up horribly at home for daring to do that very thing to my own sister ! But *he* did it to *me*—I'll swear he did ! And I ? Why I just stood up on the seat and waved my book frantically at him ; till I was ignominiously hauled down by a strong parental hand, and threatened with instant extermination if I so much as breathed again before we got out of church.

It was not till long after that I discovered the truth of it all—and that it was the organist himself, who looked up into his glass, and gave this unconventional token of his affectionate good wishes to his friend, who for a moment glanced at his companions of the choir, as he proudly armed his bride through the crowded church.

That organist is still alive, and he is well known. But we are both grey-haired now. I wonder if he'll read these lines, and find his conscience pricking him, as he realizes that someone else besides the bridegroom saw what he did in church that day !

Are you surprised at my overwhelming desire to get up near that organ, and to become one of "those dreadful choir-boys" ? They wouldn't hear of it at home, when I begged and prayed of them to allow it ; so I had to possess my soul in patience, till I reached the advanced age of eight, when misfortune came to me in the form of a serious illness, which resulted in my being sent to a grandmother, for a long holiday, to pick up health and strength

again, in the most charming of small country rectories.

Here there was a delightful little church, beautifully appointed, and lovingly cared for in every detail. Picture my astonishment and delight, when the first Sunday morning I found, what I had never before seen—choir-boys and men in cassocks and surplices !

And there was a further charm added even to this ; for in that particular church the choir-boys were limited to six, who sat on one side ; while in the opposite row of stalls sat six girls, in Red Riding Hood dresses. These girls assembled in a seat at the back and they walked in a line up the church, and took their places, just before the rest of the choir came out from the vestry.

You have already guessed the sequel. That grandmother of mine wasn't anything like so hard to explain things to as some other people of my acquaintance, and after a little special pleading I managed to get my way ; no doubt because the squire's daughter, who acted as organist, and trained the little choir, helped considerably, by starting the notion that I had a bit of a voice, and so might be rather more than ornamental. And I became a choir-boy.

I little knew what a big thing I was embarking upon, when, in that simple country church, I stood alone in front of the altar, and was solemnly admitted to the Office of a Chorister in the Church.

Long years have passed since then, with their

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sunshine and shadow, but never from that day has there been a time in my life when I have not had a seat in the choir; and never a single regret that in early childhood my life was thus directed.

CHAPTER II

THOSE STRANGE CLERGY

It is all very well for us to talk so often of "those dreadful choir-boys," but what, on the other hand, is the choir-boys' opinion of us likely to be? What, for instance, do you imagine they sometimes think of "those strange clergy," with whom they are brought so much into contact? We must appear rather odd at times; but, if I am to tell of others who have distinguished themselves in this direction, it is only fair that I should begin with some things against myself.

It was a winter day, and the snow had been falling steadily the whole afternoon. The children leaving school were in the seventh heaven with their snowballing, and there flashed into my mind the recollection of the last snowy time we had experienced, when a stray shot of some unlucky chorister had gone clean through a stained-glass window in the Lady Chapel; and the churchwardens had been as perturbed and excited as if some devastating shell had been deliberately aimed by ferocious Huns to demolish the whole building.

So, after Evensong that winter day, I summoned to my aid all the severity of authority I possessed

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to impress upon the choir-boys, ere they departed, the necessity for trampling down any natural desire for snow-fights, until the sacred precincts of the churchyard had been safely passed.

I believe the warning had its due effect, but alas for the weakness of poor human nature !

The very next morning it happened that the rector and three of his staff of clergy found themselves entering that churchyard together from the farther end, on their way to an early Service :

When the snow lay round about,
Deep, and crisp, and even.

The years dropped off the shoulders of those highly decorous gentlemen like magic, and, before any of them knew exactly what had happened, it was Rector and Precentor *versus* the other two. The latter, I fear, got decidedly the best of it, for they had youth on their side.

But whether that pair gained the victory or not was neither here nor there : the thing that really concerned me personally was that as I passed towards the church, hurriedly removing the stains of battle, who should I discover looking on with diabolical glee but three of " those dreadful choir-boys," who chanced to be going through the churchyard on their way to school, long before they had any need to be there at all !

How had the mighty fallen !

I have often wondered how I must have appeared to the choir-boys present at a Funeral Service I once conducted, just after being appointed to a

new parish. It was a fall of another kind I had that day.

The church was beautifully set on a hill, and about half-way up the steep rise of the churchyard the grave had been prepared. The soil was pure sand, which the grave-digger had thrown down the slope ; so that the top of the grave was made level, to support the usual planks for the bearers to stand firmly upon as they lowered the coffin.

Everything proceeded with the utmost reverence till the very end of the Service. I was at the head of the grave, and the rather portly sacristan at the foot, with the choir-boys arranged in a convenient place at the side. After the hymn, which closed the Service, the sacristan stepped back, when, to everyone's consternation, I suddenly took a header backwards down that great heap of sand ! There was nothing underneath the boards where I had been standing ; so, when the sacristan got off his end of the planks, the whole thing acted like a see-saw, with the most disastrous results, so far as I was concerned.

For one wild moment I suspected those giggling choir-boys of a practical joke, but afterwards I discovered it was a pure accident. Still, it must have given the boys a quaint idea of their new parson.

At another church, I remember appearing before the choir hardly at my best.

I had had some trouble with my throat, which the doctor had put right with a slight operation, though he had advised me for some months to keep

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a glass of water handy whenever I was preaching, in case I felt there was any likelihood of a fit of coughing.

That water was easy to arrange for in my own pulpit, but it was when visiting other churches that I found the difficulty.

On the evening in question I asked the vergers if he would put a glass in the church for me ; but who on earth would have imagined that he would place it on my seat, instead of in the pulpit ? However, that is what he did, with the inevitable result that, not knowing it was there, I sat on it and overturned it !

Sopping wet I was, and miserably cold all through the Service. That, of course, I could bear in silence, but it was when I passed through the choir on my way to the pulpit that the choir-boys spotted my dripping surplice ! Neither they nor I could be so very much blamed—do you think ?—for paying scanty attention to the sermon that night.

It was during those same dreadful months, when that glass of water was becoming a nightmare to me, that in another church—this time a fashionable one, with costly appointments of every description, which added point to the situation—where I had gone as a special preacher, my only chance of asking the sacristan if he could smuggle a little water into the pulpit for me, was when he passed through the vestry as the choir were all standing ready for the Service. His reply sent us into peals of laughter, though the poor old man

nearly shed tears of penitence afterwards ; because he simply answered in the innocence of his heart : “ Well, Sir, I’m awfully sorry that only last night I broke the glass ; but I’ve a nice clean jam-pot, Sir, and the water’s quite pure.”

There, sure enough, in the pulpit I found a jam-jar, which I knew I daren’t attempt to use, however badly I might want to ; and all the time I was preaching I was conscious that every eye in the choir was fastened on me, to see the strange exhibition of a special preacher drinking in such a place from a Dundee marmalade jar.

Years after, when I visited the church again, Charlie — the old sacristan — told me he still treasured that jam-pot.

Still a further story of the season of adventure with the water.

During the following Lent I exchanged pulpits on Sunday evenings with the vicar of a neighbouring church. The first Sunday I forgot all about my precious glass of water, though I should have been glad of it ; for I had had a heavy day, and my throat was troublesome.

The next Sunday, too, I thought of the water only just in time : the choir were already waiting for the vestry prayer, when I whispered to the vergers — who was an important person there, arrayed in a gorgeous gown with velvet facings — that I would like some water in the pulpit, if he could manage it with as little fuss as possible.

“ Certainly, Sir ! ” said he ; and he disappeared. In a few moments he was back. I said the prayer,

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and then the choir walked in procession, singing a hymn, from the vestry, in the tower at the west end of the church, to their places in the chancel.

We had done the same thing the Sunday before, but the people on either side of the gangway hadn't turned round and stared at me in the marked way they were doing this night. I felt strangely confused, because I was sure they had found something to stare at in that fashion. I wondered was my hair sticking up behind more than usual, or had I a smut all down my nose, that they glared at me so ?

At last we arrived at our stalls, and then—Great Cæsar !—then I saw what everyone had been gazing at. That imbecile verger had proceeded slowly and solemnly up the church, all through the singing of the hymn, immediately behind me, with his arms raised above his head, carrying a glass of water, which in the end he mounted the pulpit steps with, and deposited in full view of the congregation !

There, during the Service, it stood, while the choir-boys were glancing, first at the glass and then at me. Doubtless they were puzzling whether there was to follow an ordinary sermon, or a much more unusual and exciting performance with the water.

As for me, I tried to appear unconscious of the whole affair, and to remove the offending glass with what grace I could (How I should have loved to throw it at the verger's head !) to the back of the

pulpit, determined rather to die of coughing than to taste of that water.

It was in a country parish, in the golden autumn, that I must have cut a sorry figure before the simple choir-boys of the place, and have been reckoned one more of those eccentric clergy who sometimes came their way.

They were celebrating the "Feast of Pumpkins" in an out-of-the-way corner of "Darset dear," where they had revived or instituted much merriment in the keeping of their Harvest Home.

On the village green, hard by the tiny church, was a monster marquee, erected for the housing of a Flower Show and refreshments; and some wandering gipsies had provided swings, and cocoa-nut shies, with other delights. The whole afternoon and evening were to be spent in such complete enjoyment as only this one day in all the year afforded; so that from far and near came troops of country folk in their Sunday best.

The Thanksgiving Service was fixed at the twilight hour, and it was then that I had the honour of appearing as the special preacher. The choir had prepared an anthem (!) and they were attending in full force.

Not more than a hundred people could possibly be crowded into the little church; so the majority of those gathered together were obliged to continue their gaiety outside, even while the Service was proceeding within.

But on the morning of this particular festival day the vicar was the subject of a brain wave; for

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he conceived the idea of having the Flower Show removed, and the tent rigged up for the special Service. Every available chair and form was commandeered from church and school, and a giant harmonium did duty as an organ. Two flaring naphtha lamps were borrowed from the gipsies, the other lights consisting of hastily-procured Chinese lanterns.

All sports were closed down, the church bell was rung, and the whole gathering was collected in the marquee, where the choir were arranged at one end. Seldom have I heard the old Harvest hymns sung with such heartiness and evident pleasure. Nothing could have gone better; till it came to the special part of the Service for which I was responsible. Then, to my horror, I found they had planned for me to use a table as my pulpit; for it was necessary that I should be well above such a big congregation.

An ordinary, solid, four-legged kitchen table no one could have objected to, but what they had provided was not that; it was merely a trestle table, and that standing on uneven ground. I stepped on to it by first mounting a chair; and then, seeing the exceeding difficulty I had in keeping any balance at all, four of the hale and hearty choir-men hurried forward to the four corners, to keep the whole erection up. But it swayed, and lurched, and tipped, and tossed; till at last my thoughts got so sadly mixed that, in order to avoid a much more precipitate and undignified ending to my discourse, I brought the

sermon to a somewhat abrupt conclusion, before the allotted time.

I shall ever remember the vision of those four unoffending choir-men, whose faces were dripping with perspiration, as I descended from the heights; and the look of genuine disappointment the choir-boys wore, because such an interesting and uncertain performance had come so tamely to an end.

There are times when the particular little demon who arranges parsons' nightmares causes me still to dream that once again I am attempting to expound the Catholic Faith from anything but a sure foundation.

There was a day when, doubtless, I appeared—not, indeed, before the whole choir, but in the eyes of one of the lads—as a quaint parson; though fortunately there was a chance of giving him an explanation of the matter at the time.

One of my colleagues had gone out as vicar of a parish in New Zealand; and when we said good-bye I suggested jokingly that, seeing he was bound for the neighbourhood of Canterbury, where the lambs come from, he might send me a decent specimen of a frozen beast as a little present from the Mission Field. Never for a moment, of course, did I imagine he would take me seriously, but the next summer—as luck would have it, the very week before we were starting for our holiday—to my amazement I received a letter from Smithfield Market, to the effect that a carcase of Canterbury

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Lamb had been delivered there addressed to me, and asking for instructions as to where it should be sent.

It was an awkward time to be receiving such a consignment ; so I suggested that, as one lamb was as good as another, the Market people might be pleased to send us one after we returned from our vacation. My proposal, however, did not meet with their approval ; for they informed me that this particular beast was mine, and that they would be obliged to charge for cold storage if they kept it.

On the whole, therefore, it seemed better to get the thing ; taking with us what we might have immediate need of, and giving away the rest. But it was necessary to make certain that the animal arrived before we started off ; so a telegram was the only thing.

I referred to the Market letter, to be certain of the proper technical term to use in my wire, with the result that I prepared at the post office a telegram as follows : " Send carcase at once addressed to the Rev. ——"

This scrap of paper I handed in to my choir-boy friend—now grown into a tall lad, and in the choir promoted to a seat with the men—who stood waiting behind the counter. His look of pained wonder as he read the message was a sight to behold. I inquired whether the directions were not clear, and his astonishing reply explained his bewildered expression.

" Well, Sir, I've heard a Christian body called

by different names, but this is the first time I've ever seen one referred to as a *carcase*—and by a clergyman, too ! ”

Poor fellow ! He was under the impression that I was making final arrangements for some Funeral Service at the church !

It happened that in the parish then adjoining my own, the priest in charge of an important district church was presented to a living, and his successor could not take up his duties for about a month ; therefore, during the interregnum a *locum tenens* was conducting the Sunday Services.

Late one Saturday night the rector of this parish came in a great state of distress to ask if I could possibly help him. He had only that evening received a telegram from the *locum tenens* to say that it would not be convenient for him to come again. So there was the distracted rector begging my aid. He had been able to fix up everything for the next day except Morning Prayer : could I manage by hook or by crook to take that for him ?

It wasn't by any means an easy thing to arrange, but in the end I was able to go and help my needy brother. Eleven o'clock saw me at his district church, more or less out of breath.

When I came to open my bag, I found that in the hurry I had forgotten to put in anything besides a cassock and a surplice. However, I could borrow a stole there, no doubt, and the absence of a hood wouldn't matter for once.

The choir were waiting for the vestry prayer

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before proceeding into the church, and I asked one of the elder boys standing near me if he would be so kind as to get me a stole.

"I'm very sorry, Sir," he answered, "but we haven't any."

"O! I feel sure you'll find one of some sort, if you only know where to look for it," I ventured; "and I don't mind what colour it is—black, green, red, white, or any other shade; but I think I'd better wear something."

"No, Sir," persisted the lad, "there isn't a single one, I'm certain."

"But, surely," I argued, "whenever I've preached here before, and needed a stole, I've been able to borrow one?"

"Yes, Sir, that may be," he replied, "but they all belonged to the priest in charge, and when he left, the other week, he took them with him."

"Then, I suppose the clergyman who was taking duty here last Sunday brought his own stole with him?" I questioned.

"No, Sir," returned my self-possessed choir-boy, "he had the same difficulty, because he had come without it, too; but *he wore the bookmark out of the Bible, Sir.*"

It was at a church, not a hundred miles from the one just mentioned, that the choir-boys had a similar opportunity of meditating upon the vagaries of the clergy.

Here, one Maundy Thursday the rector suddenly collapsed, after a strenuous Lent and Holy Week, and the unfortunate Senior Priest was faced with

the heavy work of Good Friday ; for the chief part of which the rector himself had been responsible. The only help he could obtain, in response to telegrams and telephone calls, was from some London agency who promised to send the one parson they could secure.

Good Friday morning produced the most extraordinary person in clerical attire that anyone there had ever set eyes on. He was so unlike the genuine article, that the priest in charge decided at first sight the man must be a fraud ; and so determined to give him no work of any importance to do. His suspicions seemed to be confirmed when the strange individual asked if he might borrow some " robes," as he called them.

" You may select anything you require from that cupboard," said the man in command, pointing to the most sacred spot in the vestry—the rector's wardrobe, into which it was almost a sin for anyone else even to glance.

The choir were watching with awe the invasion of this sanctum ; but they looked with even greater wonder as the visiting cleric proceeded to " robe." He managed to get safely into a cassock and surplice, and then, noticing that the other clergy were wearing black scarves, he took down, not the rector's scarf, but his extra-long black cincture. This he put on, stole fashion ! But the thing, being meant to go several times round a fairly rotund Canon's waist, and even then to have its fringed ends dropping almost to his heels, when used in this novel way as a stole,

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simply hung down with two or three yards on the floor on either side.

The reverend gentleman seemed to feel that somehow this was a trifle unusual. He sent an appealing glance towards the other clergy, but they were both, to all appearance, deeply engrossed in important matters ; though in reality they were intent on watching this queer fish out of the corners of their eyes, to see what he would be up to next.

His survey of the other men showed that their scarves reached only to the bottom of their surplices ; and the stranger hauled on at one side of his cincture-scarf till the other end of it came to his knees. The result was, of course, to place on the opposite side more yards of cincture, which he had no idea how to dispose of. At last, in despair, *he wound this round and round his neck*, to use up the spare stuff.

Arrayed in this unique fashion the innocent was allowed to go into the church, though he was told that there would be nothing for him to do at that Service. When he came out, he was mopping his streaming face ; for that scarf arrangement which he dared not unwind before the whole congregation, was a bit suffocating on such a beautiful, warm Good Friday.

The boys of another choir of my acquaintance spent a memorable Sunday morning, because of their parson's stole.

It was an interesting parish, in the midst of a great horse-breeding district, and a friend, who was then the vicar, had asked me to take his

vicarage and clerical duty for a month one summer.

This proved to be a new and pleasant experience. For instance, I found the whole choir was composed of stable-boys and jockeys, from the nearest racing stables ; and one of the church-wardens was the biggest horse-trainer in the neighbourhood. Then, I had the very novel sight on Sundays of a church with more men than women in the congregation ; for the stable hands turned up well, and we had hearty and altogether delightful Services.

The church was an old one, but it had been sadly defaced with high-backed pews, hideous galleries, and a three-decker pulpit ; all of which had been allowed to stay on there, when they were cleared out of most other churches years before. An old, old parson still clung to the ways of his boyhood, and looked upon even the simplest alteration in the appearance or Services of the church as rank popery, and the invention of the Evil One.

There came a day, however, when the old gentleman passed from this dowdy, gloomy type of worship to something brighter and worthier ; and his successor was anxious, very gradually—so as not to wound even the most conservative of slow-moving country folk—to tidy up and improve the church and its Services.

With this end in view, the new vicar decided to introduce a little colour into the dull building, and, as a beginning, to institute the wearing of stoles, which would change their hue with the

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different seasons of the Church ; in place of the one and only black silk scarf of former days.

But innocent and harmless as this might be, the vicar felt that even such a mild innovation should be brought about gently ; so he planned to start with the colour least removed from black ; and on the first Sunday of the next Lent he appeared in a stole of so dark a shade of violet that only the lynx-eyed would be likely to notice the change : he hoped it might even escape unobserved.

Vain hope ! The moment the good man appeared, the whole congregation was consumed with excitement : there was staring, nudging, pointing, whispering, and a curious atmosphere, not (as the vicar had been inclined to anticipate) of annoyance and disapproval, but almost of recklessness about the whole Service. The choir in their gallery at the back of the church gave a more spirited rendering of the music than had been their wont since he had come to the parish, and all the people joined in with vigour.

It was an anxious hour for the perplexed padre, and he was not sorry to be once more in the seclusion of the vestry. Here he braced himself for the preliminary encounter with the irate churchwardens ; but to his astonishment they entered with beaming faces, and greeted him with marked cordiality.

“ Good morning, Sir,” said the one who was carrying the almsdish. “ By the weight of this I should think we had a bumper collection this morning ; and if I might be allowed to make a

prophecy, Sir, I should imagine you would be about the most popular vicar we have ever had."

"Popular?" exclaimed the mystified parson. "Popular? What do you mean?"

"Didn't you notice the commotion in church when you appeared this morning?" queried the churchwarden, as he deposited his burden upon the vestry table.

"Certainly I did," answered the vicar. "But I feared that might have been caused by this violet stole I was wearing for the first time; and when I saw the stir it seemed to create, I looked forward, not exactly to popularity, but to angry protest."

"Then you didn't catch what every man and boy was anxious to whisper to his neighbour, the moment you came out of the vestry wearing that coloured scarf, Sir?" questioned the warden once more.

"No, my friend, I heard nothing they were saying: what was it?" replied the vicar.

"Well, Sir, it was on everybody's lips at once, and the words sounded as if but one voice had spoken them—*Bendigo's colour!*"

Now *Bendigo* was the most famous racehorse that had ever gone out from those stables, or, indeed, from anywhere in that district.

These incidents connected with the dress of the clergy in church tempt me—and you see how easily I am falling into the temptation—to record one more; for the pure joy of telling

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so delicious a story, even though no choir-boy enters into it.

It was at a church in a well-known city, where I spent happy years as Precentor of one of the finest choirs it has been my privilege to be connected with ; and the incumbent himself is my authority for what I relate.

One delightful summer afternoon at tea-time there turned up at the vicarage a venerable parson, whom the vicar had not seen for many a long day ; in fact he had never been to that city before. But he was passing through the place at the beginning of a holiday, and so decided to break his journey, in order to pay a surprise visit to his old friend, if by good luck he should find him at home.

The meeting was such a pleasure to these college chums of years long past, that it was quickly arranged for the traveller to stay the night.

Over dinner that evening, stories of old days and almost forgotten acquaintances followed one another in quick succession ; till at last the vicar mentioned a man whom they had both known fairly intimately at the 'varsity. The visitor asked how he fared, as he lived in that same town, being rector of another parish. He learnt to his regret that this old friend of under-graduate days had only that week passed to his rest, and was actually to be buried on the morrow.

"I am conducting the funeral myself," added the vicar. "In fact I should like to have taken the early Celebration at his church in the morning, but I had to refuse ; because I happen to be the

only one left on the staff at the present moment—the other men are holiday-keeping—and I have my own Service to take at 7.30.”

“But,” urged his visitor, “now that I am here, couldn’t I be responsible for your early Service, and so free you?”

With some diffidence the vicar suggested that his friend would hardly care to take that Service in a church of such an advanced type, where the Eucharistic Vestments were in daily use.

“My dear fellow,” insisted his reverend brother, “I should not dream of letting such a thing make any difference on an occasion like this. True, I have never cared for Vestments, nor have I ever even seen them worn; but rather than you should miss this chance of showing a last token of respect and affection for poor —— I will gladly Celebrate for you, wearing whatever is the custom of your church.”

There was no denying the good man, so a message was sent that the vicar would after all be able to be at the other church the next morning; and he explained to his old chum that a Server would be present in good time at his own church to help the Celebrant in his vesting, while the Vestments themselves would be found neatly prepared and arranged for use in the order in which they were to be put on.

When both the Services were over, the two clergy met at breakfast, and the vicar’s first inquiry was as to how his companion had got on with his first use of Vestments.

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"O! I think I managed pretty well, thank you," was the reply; "though as a matter of fact no Server turned up. But I discovered, as you said, that the garments were all carefully placed so that I could don them easily."

"Then you had no difficulty in getting them on?" asked the vicar, with a sigh of relief.

"No! I found no difficulty in putting on the Vestments," he answered, "though I must confess that *I had the utmost difficulty in getting on my surplice over them*!"

It is the sayings and doings of queer clergy before the choir-boys that I am in this chapter writing about. Such experiences as the following, for instance, choristers are expected to stand without turning a hair.

Many quaint words and phrases are now current which were first coined by sailors or soldiers during the Great War, amongst them the drawn-out salutation of farewell: *Good-by-ee*. Everywhere this became familiar, till it even earned the distinction of being selected as the title of a *Revue* on the Variety Stage.

What punishment do you consider adequate for the absent-minded parson who, when the use of the expression I have mentioned was at its height, came to help one Sunday at my own church, and began his part of the Service in a drony, monotonous voice: *Let us pray-ee*? And ought the choir-boys to have been blamed for exploding?

The last thing in the world I should attempt would be to condemn humour in the pulpit: we

get far too little of it to be censorious about what does occasionally burst forth. But it is a thing which needs very careful, not to say reverent handling : it depends so much upon the individual. What one man might say with telling effect and the utmost decorum, another would only exhibit as the essence of bad judgment, or even worse.

Few men, for instance, possess the extraordinary gift which dear Father Stanton, of St Alban's, Holborn, had of introducing humour—whole-hearted, sparkling humour—into the pulpit ; so that it sounded perfectly natural, and offended no one.

How well I remember his coming to my own church one Sunday evening, and preaching a striking sermon on the Good Shepherd. It would have done you good to see the wrapt attention of the choir-boys.

The time slipped away so smoothly that we were all astonished to hear the preacher stop suddenly, and then say, in his own inimitable way :

“ My dear friends ! Have you noticed how the time's been running on ? Why, I've been preaching for over half an hour already, and I've lots more I want to say. It reminds me of an old friend of mine, who once said to me : ‘ Stanton, whenever I sit down to listen to a sermon, I take half a crown out of my pocket and put it on the ledge in front of me, and say to myself : “ That's for the collection, if the preacher goes on for twenty minutes ; but for every five minutes over that I take off sixpence ! ” ’ ”

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“ So I want you all to put out your half-crowns again, because I’m going on for another quarter of an hour ! ”

The choir-boys’ faces were wreathed in smiles, and we all chuckled, but the next moment we were deadly serious again, while we were brought right into the presence of the Good Shepherd ; and somehow it seemed not at all out of place that we had stopped to smile upon the way.

So I am not criticizing in this matter : I am merely suggesting that such things as I am about to describe are not conducive to the quiet behaviour expected of choir-boys—that’s all. I heard both these notices myself.

The rector was not without his fads and fancies, one at least of which was distinctly good : he was ultra-particular that the church should be kept spotlessly clean. It was his boast that, though the building was in the centre of a large and somewhat grimy town, it was possible for a lady in a light summer dress to come in and kneel down anywhere with impunity.

It was this passion of his for scrupulous cleanliness that caused him one Sunday to give out, with the usual announcements, this rather disconcerting notice :—

“ No doubt all of you saw, as you came into church this morning, that the churchwardens had provided you with new doormats. I hope you saw also, and acted upon, the injunction of the printed request they have put up in big letters—PLEASE WIPE YOUR FEET. Personally I shall be quite

satisfied if you will simply wipe your *shoes* as you enter; but, whichever you decide upon, don't forget to do either the one or the other!"

That same rector, one Sunday evening, without any warning, fired off the following at us:—

"As I announced just now, the collections to-day are for Parochial Expenses. May I venture to say that the parish at this present time is *not* in need of buttons? Still, if there is a real anxiety on the part of any of you to give buttons, permit me to suggest that you supply them by the dozen on a card—odd mackintosh buttons, I assure you, are of no earthly use to us."

Yes! second thoughts only confirm my first, that it requires a nicety of judgment, and a sense of the gravity of overshooting the mark, before you venture upon the humorous in the pulpit. That is, for the average man. There are parsons, of course, whose whole conversation and bearing breathe of dry humour: it radiates from them naturally, like light from a candle, and everything they say is lit up with it.

I had one such colleague years ago, and with him at hand work of all kinds went easier, both in and out of church. He was a Scotsman, and the quaintest humour bubbled up and ran over at the least provocation. But, though stories of him might be entertaining, they would not concern choir-boys, who are the special subject of this book. One incident, however, I may relate, because it occurred in the clergy vestry, and it was only by dint of closing, in the nick of time, the

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door leading to the vestry of the choir, that I prevented the boys—who were there with their ears attentive—from hearing what certainly would have returned to their minds whenever they afterwards saw the priests referred to.

There was a festival going forward, which meant the attendance of all the clergy from the different churches of the parish, and my Scotch colleague had turned up with a man who had just joined the staff of the district church he himself was then in charge of. As the rest of us were already there, he had a good opportunity of introducing the newcomer to us individually, which he did after his own unique fashion :—

“ This is ——, the Precentor, whose voice moves you to tears ; this is ——, who can’t sing a note, but who fortunately knows it ; this is ——, who can’t sing either, but unfortunately doesn’t know it ; this is ——, our bald cockatoo : an empty barn needs no thatch ; this is ——, our undertaker, whose face is specially adapted for taking funerals ; this is ——, the junior member of our staff, generally known as ‘ the old ’un,’ and this (coming to the jolliest man of the lot, who stood six-feet-four in his socks, and was broad withal : a mountainous person, and, like all big men, a general favourite), this is ——, *our converted elephant !* ”

You see now something of the reason for slamming that door when this recitation began. Such little pleasantries would hardly have been lost upon a few precocious youngsters I could have put my hand on in the next room,

“Those strange clergy!” What good reason choir-boys have for thinking that! It suddenly occurs to me how I thought it as a chorister one Sunday in church, when my Lord Bishop himself was at the helm.

That was back in the old days, when the choir went out after the Prayer for the Church Militant in the Eucharist. I was obliged to disappear with the others, but on that particular Sunday I was going to lunch with one of the priests; so, as he was staying to assist, I went back into the body of the church for the rest of the Service.

The bishop himself was the Celebrant; the rector and the senior priest acted as Gospeller and Epistoller; while the man I was lunching with remained in the stalls, ready to help later.

As the moment for assisting drew near, my parson came out of his seat, and went silently up to the Sanctuary; where, kneeling down immediately behind the bishop, he bent very low in his devotions. Just then the bishop stepped back from the top step at the altar, in order to kneel down, and all the confusion that followed set me wondering whether things were always done in that way when a bishop took the Service.

My friend, as I said, was kneeling immediately behind the Celebrant, and (as he explained to me afterwards) he was certainly not expecting his lordship to be doing any walking about at that moment; so it transpired that the reverend father stepped back right on top of his reverend son, to the unutterable bewilderment of them both.

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The bishop bounded into the air, believing (as he also explained afterwards) that he had suddenly been seized by a dog; while the confused curate crawled out backwards from under the episcopal robes, with his hair all brushed the wrong way, and a look of distressing alarm upon his face.

Now, if we boys had ever attempted anything approaching such a performance in that same church, we should have been summarily dismissed, without the option of a fine. But then, of course, bishops and other clergy are much greater people than mere choir-boys, and the king can do no wrong. Besides, what's the use of being a Church dignitary if there are no plums attached to the office? At least that's about the reasoning of an average kid in the choir, when he beholds an exhibition like this.

Of course the little unrehearsed episode just related was not in any way the fault of the dear bishop; but these reverend prelates are by no means free from blame in the matter of corrupting the morals of a choir during Service-time.

One cold, wet Sunday evening, as a small choir-boy, I remember wondering what on earth was happening when, before the last notes of the General Confession had faded from our lips (we sang it in harmonized form in those unregenerate days), a disturbance occurred in the body of the church, as a stray bishop arose in his rustling mackintosh, and, in a stentorian voice, pronounced the Absolution from his pew!

Why were we boys soundly rated for carrying

on an animated conversation throughout the rest of Evensong? How did we know that this interfering person was a bishop, and that he had only misunderstood the meaning of a rubric in the Prayer Book? We naturally thought some brawler or demented individual had come into the church, and we were all on the look-out for further and perhaps more startling developments. Yet, from the fuss that was made about our behaviour afterwards, anyone would have imagined that we boys were entirely to blame for that bishop's lack of common sense.

Perhaps the strangest of all strange happenings, and one which led to more hilarity amongst both choir and congregation than I have ever witnessed before or since, occurred in a usually peaceful little church in Devonshire, where, on the occasion of the Harvest Thanksgiving that autumn I had been asked to preach.

According to the custom of such times in country places, the clergy of the neighbourhood attended in full force, and amongst them that evening was a brother who could only be described as ponderous : he must have been not far short of twenty stone in weight, and he was the rector of the next parish, some three miles off.

There was room to accommodate the other visiting clergy in the choir-stalls, but the hefty one and myself were conducted to the Sanctuary ; and my reverend brother was asked if he would be so kind as to read the Second Lesson. The voice with which he assented to this proposition in the vestry

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was as ponderous as his person : I felt that for once the reader would be both seen and heard well.

The little church had been tastefully decorated with all kinds of flowers, fruit, vegetables, and corn. One farmer had sent an enormous pumpkin, in shape like the big-tyred wheel of a modern motor-car. The placing of this offering in the general scheme of decoration had been a problem. Patient ladies had wheeled it about to different positions, finally deciding that it looked least in the way standing against the lectern—an eagle carved in oak.

The choir that night were singing " lustily and with a good courage," and as they wiped their brows after the special Festal Magnificat, the heavy-weight padre from the Sanctuary passed pompously to the lectern, adjusting his spectacles on the way. It was this preoccupation on his part which was the prelude to the coming disaster ; for he noticed no pumpkin—not he, but walked deliberately into it, and over it !

Before anyone knew what had happened there was a terrific crash : down came parson, and lectern, and all ! But that was not the worst ; for, while the choir and congregation gasped in frightened awe, there issued from the midst of the wreckage, in a deep resounding tone, one single word : " D—— ! "

Then rushed the wardens and the sidesmen to assist, and as the tension of the strain loosened, the uncontrolled merriment of one and all burst forth in peals of laughter. The ruffled tumbler

appeared to be the only one who couldn't see the humour of the situation, and it was the fury on his face that did most to subdue the people; for he stood manfully to his guns, and when the wardens had set up again the eagle, he read that Second Lesson in a voice like thunder.

Needless to say, the sermon was the shortest I ever preached; and for once the erring choir-boys received no reprimand for their hilarious and unseemly behaviour during the Service.

CHAPTER III

THOSE TRYING ORGANISTS

ORGANIST—Choir-master—Precentor. In some favoured cathedrals and churches there is a separate person for each of these offices, while more generally one man combines at least two of them. This is not the place for discussing their relative positions or duties : I merely mention their names in order to note that when I happen to speak of organist or choir-master it will usually be with the supposition that these are interchangeable terms.

It is a fairly common opinion that anyone who is able to play a few chants and hymns with pedal accompaniment is fit to take charge of a choir and organ. This idea is not by any means confined to the laity : on the very day I am writing these words I see in my *Church Times* an advertisement from a vicar asking for a *chauffeur who can also play the organ*.

Of course no one expects that in every country parish there can be a doctor of music available, but we've miles to travel yet before we get the average parson or layman to see how much is involved in the ordering of the music of the Church, or how difficult and important a work is entrusted to the organist and choir-master.

In my own humble opinion the choice of an organist in an ordinary town parish is of even greater importance than the selection of one of the assistant clergy ; and we shall not do much towards raising the general tone of Church music till we offer more adequate stipends to those who undertake this special and responsible work ; so that we may insist upon their being fully trained and altogether competent.

At the same time, we owe a debt of the deepest gratitude to the multitude of patient, plodding, willing helpers in this work, who, in spite of untold disadvantages in the lack of training in themselves and of appreciation in others, have stuck to their task right nobly.

Forgive me if I raise a smile at your expense, my friends ! We all do quaint things in our work sometimes, and you've already been smiling at some of the mistakes which I have made. We may become the better friends, and also learn to mend our ways, if we can enjoy a hearty laugh together over the sorry figures we have cut from time to time.

In an experience of many years now, it has been my pleasure to work with a number of organists, from well-known doctors in cathedrals, to their humbler brethren in little village and mission churches ; and a better set of men and women I never could have wished to know. Doubtless we have often rubbed one another up the wrong way, with our likes and dislikes, or our incompetence and mistakes—musicians are notoriously touchy,

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and jealous, and difficult to get on with—but nothing approaching a row has ever darkened my association with a host of such friends. So you will understand in what spirit I continue this chapter.

“Those trying organists!” Indeed they are; and the amateur ones most of all.

Why, the first thing I was asked to do as a parson was to go into the church and “lend a hand” at the choir-practice. I should find the organist taking the boys alone, before the men appeared a little later. I did! But perhaps it would be more correct to say that they were taking him; for they were certainly in command.

I entered the church silently at the west end, and—O! the vision! The organist was up in the organ loft, playing away merrily at the Psalms (far too loudly to hear if any mistakes in the singing were made), while the boys were left to their own sweet will behind and below him. I hadn't taken half a dozen steps up the nave before the biggest boy on the side opposite the organ let fly a kneeler at the organist's head. It was a near thing, but it just missed what it was aimed at; though it neatly caught the open psalter on the music rest, and sent it flying.

Immediately there was pandemonium: yells of laughter from the boys, and a hurricane of wrath, abuse, and threats from up above. The player would come down and make mincemeat of the lot—so he said; but while he was descending I deemed it wiser to beat a silent retreat; so that I might

put in my first appearance in the choir under less ruffled conditions. How could you expect that man, skilled as he undoubtedly was in organ-playing, though lacking in the elementary principles of choir-training, to keep any boys in order?

That was a new church, built about five years before my advent; and I discovered later that the choir-boys had been a "problem" from the very first.

It appears that, while the church was being built, they were anxious to start the training of a choir; that both singers and building might be ready together. The squire's niece—a gentle, willing soul, and a favourite with everyone—undertook the teaching of the boys, who went to the big house for their instruction. She began with the raw material,—not one boy amongst them had had the least experience in any part of the work—and my heart sinks out of sympathy with her.

The inevitable occurred. After the first evening or two, the novelty began to wear off, and the real, laborious task to stare them in the face. At this point a practised hand is needed, to make repetition appear interesting instead of monotonous, and hard, grinding work partake of the nature of recreation. In this dear lady's case, what she lacked in technical skill she tried to make up with cajolings, entreaties, threatenings, warnings, and the like; till, when all else had failed, she descended to the last device of the hopeless, and burnt her boats by offering bribes.

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“ If you are all good boys to-night, do your best, sing well, and cause no trouble, I’m going to give you each a threepenny piece ! ” Result—such model behaviour for a whole hour as she had never experienced since the first night they came. And the sequel—exactly what might have been expected : at the next practice an impertinent demand : “ No threepence—no singing, nor anything else ! ”

That highway robbery, of course, could not be submitted to ; so the boys were sent off with the hope that they would come again the week after, feeling penitence over their misbehaviour and sordid motives.

The next week the choir-boys came ; but for half an hour they would have tried the patience of an archangel. The good lady, anyway, had come to the end of her tether, and she thus addressed the assembled twelve :

“ You are thoroughly bad boys, and I’m absolutely ashamed of your behaviour ! Some of you have been worse than others, and have upset those who were willing to try : I mean you—and you—and you ! ” pointing in turn to half a dozen young scapegraces. “ Now, before you came to-night, I looked out some lovely apples, so as to give one to each boy who tried his best ; but you six really bad boys will go without any ; and I’ll see if the rest deserve theirs, by the way they behave and work for the next half-hour.”

Then did the six most miserable sinners depart, with downcast faces, and hearts full of regret over

what they had forfeited ; while the remainder were sweetness and obedience personified for the next thirty minutes. So exemplary, indeed, was their conduct, that as the now beaming lady led them down to the great hall, where the apples had been arranged on a table, she promised them, as a special reward, not only one apiece, but the other six, which the lads in disgrace had lost.

Never were spirits higher than in that smug half-dozen boys—till they reached the hall ; when they discovered that the six deep-dyed villains, who had left earlier, *had gone off with the whole dozen apples !*

The fatal system of bribing had been practised, after a slightly different manner, in a parish, where I was appointed Priest-in-charge of a district church some years later. This was in the poor part of a big town, and my predecessor, to secure some kind of order, had endured a weekly purgatory by acting as a sort of clerical policeman at the boys' practices ; because the organist had no more idea of discipline than a pianola.

Fortunately for me, that organist left with the parson, and I chose a lad from the parish church choir to play, who had knowledge enough of the work to manage simple things at the beginning, and who was eager to learn anything I might be able to teach him in the matter of choir-training.

The first practice it was that so astonished me, because when it was over, I found the boys still lingering outside ; and they walked with me in a body along the street. At first I thought this might be their pretty way of welcoming me, by

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seeing me safely home, but a few questions revealed the truth. They were expecting me to do what had always been the custom of the man in charge before me—to conduct them to the nearest Fried Fish Saloon and *stand "fish and chips" all round*.

That same district church was, a little later, the scene of a remarkable exploit on the part of a very distinguished musician. He was organist at the parish church, and one of the cleverest choir-trainers it has ever been my pleasure to work with. It is worth remarking also that his bulk was as great as his musical ability.

It happened that my own youthful organist damaged his knee one day in the middle of Lent ; so that it was impossible for him to get about for a time ; and there was I, responsible for a special Lenten Service that very evening, when I certainly did not wish to be saddled with the task of playing the organ as well as conducting the Service. I knew my friend would help me if he could, and I found him quite ready to come to my aid.

Never before had our music in that Mission church gone as it went that night ; nor had we till then any idea of the wonders hidden away in our quaint little organ, which seemed to need only the touch of a master hand to bring them forth.

During the sermon my portly friend did me the honour of leaving his organ seat, and sitting in the front row of chairs near by to listen. If he had been satisfied with listening, all would have been well ; but, I suppose by force of a bad habit, after a few minutes he tilted back his chair on its

hind legs ; and I caught sight of him swaying gently backwards and forwards.

Now you can see what I in an instant knew instinctively would happen—that swaying could end in only one way ; and it did ! Just at what I meant to be the most impressive part of my address, over went the renowned musician backwards with a crash ! After a momentary effort on our part to be quiet and dignified, we found it useless ; so we all exploded with one accord.

Don't be shocked at, and criticize us ! If you had seen those legs waving wildly in the air, you would have laughed louder than anyone there, even though it was in church at a Service.

Any more sermon that night was out of the question, and the very-much-upset organist was not the least relieved amongst us when I gave out the closing hymn. But supposing it had been one of his own choir-boys who had behaved exactly as he had done that evening ; think what trouble he would have brought upon his unlucky little head from that very same gentleman !

Another adventure in a small daughter church is worth recording here ; this time the affair of an organist of somewhat less experience and skill.

I was studying for Orders at the time ; and the Priest-in-charge of the district church had commandeered me to read the Lessons for him at a week-day Evensong, which once a week was choral with an address.

This dear fellow was one of the best, and at the present day he is a famous preacher.

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Preaching was always his one delight ; so much so that his mind was ever running on sermons ; and when he preached in those days, everything else in the Service seemed to be a sort of blank to him—all his thoughts were taken up with the address he had to deliver. This resulted in his doing and saying many strange things during the Service, which afterwards he had no recollection of ; in fact, he would often stoutly deny that he had ever done any such thing as he was accused of.

I had never read a Lesson in my life ; so that on the evening in question I went down to the church in fear and trembling ; but when I saw there was not an over-crowded congregation my spirits somewhat revived.

The choir-boys were there in full force—a fairly lively little party, chosen, I imagined as soon as the Service began, for the amount of steam power each could bring to bear upon his singing : the sheer noise they made was terrifying.

Yet even that was not so appalling as the thunder the good lady produced at the organ. Never have I heard anything approaching it. Her only idea of pedalling seemed to be to find the lowest keynote, and to stand on it throughout the hymn or psalm !

That combination of organ and choir unnerved me for reading those Lessons, but I did my best ; though my own voice sounded to me rather like a twittering sparrow's, after the blast of the terrible ones.

With the beginning of the *Nunc Dimittis* I knew that my personal ordeal was over, and I found freedom even to take note of the humorous. But I was hardly prepared for what followed, in which I disgraced myself equally with the choir-boys; for we all burst with laughter together—it came upon us so suddenly and unexpectedly.

My preacher friend had evidently not been unmindful of the overwhelming pedal accompaniment, though his mind was still mainly occupied with the points of his coming sermon, as the very strangeness of the unconscious aside in his announcement of the first hymn clearly showed. In giving this out, these were his words, all spoken in the same clear voice, without any break between them, except that in the middle he turned from the congregation to the thunder-struck organist :

“Hymn number 274: number 274—“Through the night of doubt and sorrow”; and if you can’t manage those pedals properly, Miss, for heaven’s sake leave them out altogether !”

It was that direction, followed by the immediate collapse of the good lady, who, in her agitation at being addressed in such a fashion, promptly knocked down her heavy hymn-book on to the organ keys, which resulted in putting the choir-boys and myself out of action for the rest of the Service.

Organists can indeed be trying at times, even when their musical ability is beyond question.

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There was a particularly sweet old gentleman I once knew well—an accomplished performer, and a first-class choir-trainer, with “his soul wrapped up in his music; so that he soared above the common things of everyday life,” as one of his warmest admirers used to say. That was just it: he had a soul for music far beyond the average, but so often when that soul was soaring to the lofty regions of the highest art he forgot that he had a body here below, surrounded by an ordinary herd of singers; and at the very moment we needed him on the spot, to conduct us safely over some pitfall, he wasn’t there, so to speak, but was goodness knows where up in the clouds, while we floundered about on the earth beneath.

If only this revered old gentleman had been possessed of a little extra common sense to mix with his high art, how many more storms he and his choir would have weathered! In this kind of way, I mean:

His was a delightful old parish church in the West of England; and on state occasions the choir entered by the great west door, singing in procession to their stalls in the chancel.

Anyone of experience knows the difficulty there is for the organist and the choir to hear one another when they are at the opposite ends of a big crowded church, where everyone is singing heartily. Perhaps the best way to secure that organ and choir keep together then is for both to observe strict time, and to pay no attention

to delicate marks of expression ; while the organist plays so that he can be heard by everyone, and with distinct emphasis on each chord.

Yet that was just one of the special occasions on which our old friend would choose to soar to the heights aforesaid. He would play divinely, introducing *diminuendos*, *pianissimos*, *rallentandos*, "and rippling, soft arpeggios, like harps borne on the air"; with the result that by the time the choir got far enough up the church to reach the sound of his heavenly music they were best part of a verse behind or ahead of the organ.

To avoid this calamity in future, the venerable organist decided that the Processional hymn should be sung unaccompanied ; till the choir drew near the chancel, when the organ could join in, to make a grand and harmonious finish. That was all very sound, and I have heard it done with effect in an enormous church at a festival of choirs ; but—the organist has to be pretty smart in picking it up exactly in the right key, when the voices of the choir come within earshot of him.

That very difficulty of the natural dropping of the voices in a crowded building presented itself to the good man at the church I am speaking of, but he sought to remedy it in a novel fashion ; making the experiment (which was never repeated !) on the particular evening I had been pressed into service there.

It happened that on the clerical staff of that church there was no parson who could sing, and

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when any special festival of theirs fell on a week-day, they were kind enough to invite me to take the Service. This time it was the Harvest Festival.

Behold us, then—choir and clergy—assembled under the tower, ready to start the Processional hymn, “Come, ye thankful people, come!” The organist arranged to walk first—where the Processional Cross generally goes, only they hadn’t such a thing there—and when the hymn had been announced, he turned towards us, and suddenly blew the keynote A on a pitchpipe. From that, the altos, tenors, and basses found and hummed their respective notes, and on the beat we began in excellent style.

All would have gone perfectly, if we had been allowed to continue in that way; but not a bit of it! To my horror, at the end of the first verse, we all stood stock still, and that dreadful man turned round on us, and blew with his ramshorn—I mean his pipe—once more!

We had dropped nearly a whole tone, but the old keynote pulled us up. Ugh! Before we could start away on the second verse, we had to find and hum the correct chord again! This happened at the end of each verse; till the organist slipped on to his stool to accompany us, when—in spite of all his pains with the pipe to keep us in the right key—we were still a semitone below where he was when he joined in on the organ!

I have no idea what anyone else in the choir or congregation felt during the singing of that

hymn, but I am glad my inmost thoughts found no place in the fulsome report of the proceedings which afterwards appeared in the local press.

A Priest-organist caused me many searchings of heart, only a short time ago. You see, he was trying to do two things at once, on the particular evening I have in mind—play the organ, and also pay particular attention, from the parson's point of view, to every part of the, to him, new type of Service. There is bound to be a muddle under such conditions.

In another chapter I have something to say about Lantern Services. Very great care as to every little detail is necessary, if these are to go smoothly and reverently; and one essential is that you should be able to depend upon your organist to be on the spot, with the music ready at the moment you need it.

This I carefully explained to my Priest-organist friend, when in his big London church, with a large congregation, I was responsible for a Service of this character; and apparently he clearly understood. His work was light, for he had merely four simple hymns to accompany; but I looked for him to do it the more perfectly on that account.

When, after my introductory words, I announced the first hymn, I expected the organist to be at his instrument, waiting to start at once; but, not so! The first verse was displayed upon the screen, and the people were prepared to begin, yet no sound issued from the organ.

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Instead, there appeared in the nave gangway, from out the darkness down the church, the mysterious figure of the organist, bent almost double, so as to avoid putting his head in the rays of light which came from the lantern, and flashing an electric torch as he walked. He was closely followed by the biggest choir-boy, who was also doubled up, and crept on tiptoe.

Those two looked for all the world like a couple of burglars, who had just broken into a house, and were doing their best to avoid detection. We had to wait while they walked the length of the church in that fashion, and finally found their way to the organ, where one played and the other blew.

Even that might have been forgiven, but I could hardly believe my eyes when, as soon as the hymn was over, and I was proceeding with the Service, the two creeping figures repeated their burgling performance, and returned to the back of the church. So they did before and after each of the other three hymns; because the priest wanted to lose nothing of the Service from the front. I fear he found my appreciation of his enthusiasm somewhat chilly.

You will not forget—will you?—the trying nature of the work of the organist, who has to deal with boys of every stamp gathered into the choir.

Think of the homes that some choir-boys in rough places come from! What backing have you got there, where most you need it when you

are attempting to form the character of a child ? What is there in such boys to appeal to ? How long do you imagine you would be raising any kind of *esprit de corps* amongst the lads of your choir ?

Yet patience and persistence will work wonders in the most unlikely quarters, and in the years they are with you it is astonishing what can be accomplished even with "those dreadful choir-boys."

I suppose the experience of most choir-masters is that the spirit of wickedness seems to breathe over the choir in gusts. Sometimes for a year or two there will be little or no trouble, and the holy grumblers of the parish will become nearly bankrupt by the dwindling of their stock of complaints. Then, one or two new boys will introduce a rougher, looser element, and the whole choir will go "down again to the deep, and stagger like a drunken man."

That's the time when the man in the street might with advantage take a peep behind the scenes, and see if the choir-master has quite the soft job he is by the uninitiated so constantly credited with.

The successful organist must keep his eye on the individual character of every boy in his choir ; and he has a variety of types to deal with. The bulk of the boys are, as a rule, just ordinary, and amenable to discipline ; though easily led by the few more ardent spirits, who need special attention, because they become the ringleaders in any mischief that is abroad.

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For instance, there is the "cherub," who looks like a little angel, but whose angelic qualities are almost invariably but skin deep.

Then there is the "pickle," bubbling over with energy and fun, and possessing a brain most fertile in the hatching of plots and plans for escapades and practical jokes.

The "prig" is always detestable: he is generally a boy, who, because of his looks, or his voice, or his family, or his piety (!) gives himself abominable airs. More often than not he is a sneak, and is perpetually in trouble with the rest of the choir.

The "softy" is the most difficult of all to deal with; for as a rule there is some deficiency in his moral sense, and he is ready to be sly and underhanded, while he has few, if any, higher qualities which can be appealed to.

And at rare intervals there creeps into a choir the "bad lot," who will sometimes succeed in upsetting all the boys before he can be discovered and expelled.

So the choir-master's task is by no means an easy one. Here are a couple of choice situations that have come my way. Both of them needed rather delicate handling, with no time to think out any special course of action beforehand. You may find fault with the way in which these problems were tackled; but how would you yourself have proceeded in the same circumstances?

It was during the time I was reading for Orders that I sought to be of use to, while I tried to gain

more experience from, a clerical friend who was in charge of the choir of a large church.

The first evening I accompanied this companion to the boys' rehearsal was destined to be an exciting one. As we neared the church, we could distinguish unmistakable sounds of revelry. My friend echoed my own thoughts when he suggested that something untoward was proceeding, and that we might approach warily, and round the corner take a look before we leapt.

Where the road turned, there was an enormous tree at the edge of the path, behind which we sheltered ourselves as we surveyed the scene.

What a picture! On the roof of the vestry squatted the members of the junior choir, while beneath upon the pathway stood a red-faced and exasperated policeman. He had lost his temper, and a moment after we reached that tree he lost his helmet also; for those young limbs had filled their pockets with enormous horse-chestnuts, and their aim was good!

We watched the battle as long as we dared; till the tears were rolling down our cheeks, and we were forced to retire to the shelter of the houses and compose our faces before we advanced with a stern exterior that belied our inmost feelings.

The pelting ceased, partly because of our appearance, but chiefly, I believe, because the ammunition was spent.

My friend left the boys on their elevated perch,

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while he opened negotiations with Robert : not at all an easy task. There was much parleying, and the dark cloud only gradually disappeared from the officer's face. What argument had the greatest influence with him I never inquired, but personally I think the half-crown which crossed his palm was the most potent, though this act of bribery and corruption was carefully screened from the choir-boys' view.

The constable disappeared with dignity, remarking aloud as he went his way : " Well, gentlemen, I'll do what I can with the Inspector, and if I am able to save a prosecution, I will."

It was a case in which we felt justified in catching those boys with guile, and the plot worked ; for they descended one by one in frightened silence, and went into the vestry. Personally I thought it wiser to busy myself at the other end of the room, with my back to the rest, while my friend delivered an oration on the enormity of the offence, which brought tears to all eyes ; only I fear the tears which welled from my own proceeded from the same cause as my aching sides.

The second of the experiences I have referred to occurred at that same church.

Once more my friend and I had gone together to the choir-boys' practice, at which that evening there was a certain indefinable something—an unusual tension, which made you feel that, although the behaviour of the boys was above reproach, all was not well. We had not long to wait before we found out what was amiss.

A sharp rat-a-tat-tat sounded on the vestry door, causing in an instant a painful silence to fall upon the lads, as they eyed one another with uneasy glances.

"Come in!" called the choir-master solemnly—and then the storm burst! Open flew the door, and in stalked a gallant Major, livid with rage, and brandishing his walking-stick. His actual language, during the moments here and there that he was articulate, I dare not repeat: but it was terribly effective; for the faces of those boys grew ashen as they listened.

"I would have you know, Sir," spluttered the man of war, as he addressed himself to the choir-master, "that these —— boys of yours have literally stripped my garden of every apple I possessed! Deliberate robbery, Sir, in the broad daylight; and by these little ——'s, Sir, whom you are wasting your time teaching to sing on Sundays as brazen hypocrites, and whited sepulchres ('Some' talk, eh? But you could hardly expect the irate gentleman to be over-careful with his use of metaphor under such moving circumstances); when you ought to be instructing them to observe the Ten Commandments, and to keep their —— little hands from picking and stealing!

"Don't answer me!" (No one had attempted to speak: we were all of us far too terrified or electrified.)

"I'll have the Law upon the lot of you, Sir: I'll prosecute the whole —— boiling of you !

"Do you realize—you scoundrels, that two of

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those small trees had the choicest of apples on them, in the pink of condition; ready to be exhibited next week; and certain of a Prize?

"You shall pay for this, Sir: you and your — choir-boys: that I promise you!

"And what have you to say for yourself? Why don't you make some answer, or give some explanation? Here am I telling you of a dastardly outrage, and you haven't even a word of apology to offer! I believe you're aiding and abetting the boys in their — wickedness!"

With these words (and many more like unto them, which I have left out as unprintable) the aggrieved officer wound up his tirade and subsided, out of sheer exhaustion.

I remember at the time (inexperienced as I then was in tackling sudden problems of much perplexity, which I have since learnt are of fairly frequent occurrence in the life of a parson) marveling at the cool and collected way that choir-master gave the soft answer which turned away wrath. He first addressed the trembling boys; his words being punctuated with pointed observations and exclamations from the Major.

"Is this true, boys? Have you been stealing this gentleman's fruit? I see the guilty look on all your faces. Empty your pockets!"

This caused another boiling over of the owner, as he saw his prize apples being piled in a considerable heap upon the vestry table; but on the boys' part there was a gloomy silence.

"So this is the work of the choristers of S. —'s,

who are looked up to and trusted by the clergy and people of the church ! I am utterly ashamed of you, and heart-broken to think that anything so dreadful should ever have happened amongst boys whom I thought had more respect and affection for their choir-master than to bring this disgrace upon him as well as upon themselves."

The genuine tears which this little home thrust brought to the eyes of the now overwrought boys I believe had most effect in mollifying the Major. Perhaps he knew less than some how soft and affectionate a lad's heart really is.

"Now you clearly understand," continued my friend, "that the punishment for stealing is prison, from which there is certainly no escape for those who are caught red-handed as you have been. And if you don't, all of you, find yourselves in jail to-night, it will only be because of the magnanimous clemency (these long words were meant specially for the Major's ears : I doubt if any of the boys had the least idea of their meaning) of this gentleman, whose valuable property you have stolen."

"I want to plead with you, Sir," turning to the much-softened soldier, "for the sake of the good name this church and choir have hitherto borne, to overlook for once such a serious offence ; on condition that each of these boys offers you his humble apology, and that together they pay you the full value of all they have stolen, at the same time giving you their word of honour that never again will they enter upon such an evil course."

The wind was evidently taken out of the good

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man's sails ; for he simply made some almost inaudible remark about not wishing to resort to the extremest measures ; and when each boy in turn said with obvious penitence : " I beg your pardon, Sir, and hope you will forgive me," the old gentleman was prepared to go without more ado. The senior boy put the remainder of the stolen apples into the waste-paper basket, and carried them after the Major as he departed.

There was no more practice that night, but those little reprobates got the soundest wiggling I ever heard delivered to a choir, and they all left in abject misery, most of them shedding bitter tears. When the last had gone, my friend sank into a chair and mopped his face, as he said : " Well, old chap, that's about the toughest job I've had to engineer for many a long day ; but I think it's taught everybody a lesson."

How little were we either of us prepared for the undreamt-of sequel !

At that moment a second knock came at the vestry door, much more timid than the one which began the excitement of the evening ; and in answer to the summons : " Come in ! " there entered the smallest boy in the choir, with the sweetest little cherub face you ever set eyes on.

" What is it now, Cyril ? " asked my companion, in none too soft a tone.

" If you please, Sir," replied the nipper, with a seraphic smile, " I kept just this one ; because I thought you'd like it." And he put on the table

before us about the rosiest and most delicious-looking of the stolen apples !

For a moment we were speechless. Then with marvellous self-control that choir-master took the child upon his knee, and talked to him till he was convulsed with sobs at the thought of the enormity of his added crime.

At length, my friend and I were alone with that miserable but inviting apple. What could we possibly do with it—the wretched thing? It would have been ridiculous to take it back to its rightful owner, and wicked to throw it away; so to save further trouble we just broke it in half and ate it between us !

The organist, then, if occasionally he tries others, has in turn his own burdens to bear.

Now I look at that last sentence, I see it is only another way of saying that we all have trials to endure, from the greatest of us to the least. And that brings to mind yet a third way of saying the same thing, associated with my own days as a choir-boy.

If ever we had to suffer from a particularly dull sermon—not by any means a rare occurrence, judged at least from the choristers' point of view—one of our favourite ways of passing the time was to send some quaint sentence or verse right up and down our side of the choir, to see what strange alterations it would gather on the way, and whether it could be said without laughing.

The first boy whispered the words to the second boy, and so on all down the row, and then back

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again. It was the oddest thing to see how mixed up the sentence often got before it arrived once more at its source ; the object being, of course, to select just such a verse as might most easily get twisted on its travels.

Now for the classical quotation that suddenly came to my mind as I wrote that sentence about each of us having his trials. It ran something like this :—

Big fleas have little fleas
Upon their backs to bite 'em ;
While little fleas have lesser fleas,
And so *ad infinitum*.

If only the good preacher had guessed what was passing from one to another of the white-robed band behind him ! Yet such stuff as that was decidedly more interesting to us than the learned discourse of our reverend father, which was far above out of our sight and understanding. And, after all, whose fault was it that we found something else less dull than listening to him—ours or his ?

So, as I began to remark, the organist has his own trials to bear.

Think, for instance, of the joy the boys feel if they can manage to score off, or trip up, or catch napping either the choir-master or one of the clergy !

I have already mentioned the organist at the church where I started my clerical career : how that my first vision of him was when he was under

fire from his boys below in the stalls. You would expect such a man to be fair game for a lively gang of youngsters. He was for ever giving you an example of how not to do it.

One Sunday evening in the summer, my duty was to conduct a Service at a daughter church in a little hamlet belonging to the parish, just over two miles away—a pleasant walk at such a time of the year.

It happened that evening that the boys of the parish church choir assembled rather earlier than usual, and they were evidently a bit noisy as they waited on the vestry steps, much to the annoyance of the gentleman of hassock fame.

Well, there is more than one way of tackling a band of chattering choir-boys, but you might have been certain beforehand that if there was a wrong way our friend would select it. He did on this occasion. Opening the vestry door suddenly, he roared at the boys: "Will you clear out—all of you! Go right away! I can't put up with your noise any longer!" With what result, do you think?

Picture my own consternation, when I found all those young urchins calmly waiting for me outside the little district church as soon as our simple Service was over that evening!

"My dear boys," I remarked, with the utmost surprise, "what is the meaning of this?"

"We've come to walk home with you, Sir," was the calm reply of the biggest lad.

"Come to walk home with me?" I echoed,

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with growing concern. "But how is it you're out here at all at this hour, when you ought to be just finishing the Service in the parish church?"

"O, please Sir, Mr —— said he didn't want us, and sent us away," was the only answer I could get at the moment; and all the way back I was trying to realize what agonies my beloved vicar had been enduring at the unheard-of enormity of the whole of the choir-boys being absent from a Sunday Evensong!

It was idiotic of the boys to do such a thing, no doubt, but that never occurred to them: they saw an opportunity of scoring off the man who had so often been down on them; so they simply took him at his word, in the most perverse way imaginable, and—scored.

Back in my own early days I recall the delight with which we used to catch the organist napping, whenever a certain old priest took the Sung Eucharist.

Since that time it has suggested itself to me that the reason we boys first came to make the slip was because we got such a drilling in the old Church Catechism. If you remember anything of that wonderful compendium of Church doctrine, you will recollect that "My duty towards God" ends with the words: "And to serve Him truly all the days of my life." What a satisfaction it was to reach that sentence when you were called upon to repeat the "Duty"! You knew you had got safely to the end of your task.

Well, there comes, about the middle of the long

Prayer for the Church Militant, a sentence very like that, which runs: "Truly serving Thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life." That dear old priest I have spoken of invariably slowed down when he got to these words, and made a distinct pause after them.

The result was that one Sunday, when that *rallentando* and pause occurred, some of the boys, with the unconscious memory of the "Duty" coming to a welcome end with these words, sang quite naturally: *Amen*, the rest of the choir picking it up in harmony at once. That, of course, drew down upon us the wrath of the choir-master, for not taking more care and paying more attention to what we were doing.

We were all duly humbled; but imagine our glee when, on the next occasion that same old gentleman took the Service, at those very words the choir-master himself came in with the *Amen* on the organ! He had been caught napping with a vengeance, and we knew that never again could he rate us for making the same mistake.

From that day we just took the matter into our own hands, and whenever we chose to make the little arrangement between ourselves, *Amen* was sung in that particular place in the prayer. The organist knew that we were playing up to him; but he also knew that his tongue was tied—that he dared not say a word about it; because we could always hold up before him his own slip at the same trap. Nice lads, eh?

On the staff of a church where I once found

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a happy place—happy very largely because there was a delightful organist, a splendid choir, and exceptionally well-rendered daily choral Services—there came for a time a parson with certain little oddities of manner, which you knew at once would be frozen on to by the choir-boys. They would be able to score every time with such a man. And they did, without any doubt; though the parson himself always seemed to be blissfully ignorant of the fact that he was being made game of.

I'll give but one instance of how easy it was for the boys to play up to this meek person. He was the most solemn of men, and besides being over-punctual at every Service, he seemed to be in mortal terror lest one single hair of his head should be out of place when he entered the church. He would get to the vestry always a quarter of an hour before he need be there, and his first task would be to brush his hair; then when he had put on his cassock and surplice he would brush it again—a hair might have gone astray as his head went through the neck of his gown. There was another brushing when he had finally got his hood over his precious locks, and after all was finished, and he was fit for a glass case in an exhibition, he would seat himself in a large arm-chair in the priests' vestry, and wait for us ordinary mortals to appear.

The choir vestry was above the other, which meant that the boys had to go upstairs to vest; and our rule was that they were to be down five minutes before each Service, standing in order

in the clergy vestry, where strict silence was observed.

The boys were quick to notice that when they came into the lower vestry and said "Good evening, Sir!" to the new parson, as he sat in state to receive them, he invariably put the tips of his fingers together very slowly, bowed nearly double, and, in the same deliberate "holy voice" as he said: "The Lord be with you" in church, replied: "Good evening, my boy!"

That was quite enough to set lively, inventive brains to work, but unfortunately I was not at Evensong on the night their plot was put through. The organist told me of it with great glee afterwards. Unknown to the boys, he happened that evening to be in the corner of the lower vestry, out of their sight till they were standing in their places. He wondered at first why so little noise proceeded from upstairs, but concluded from this very fact that something was going forward; so he was all the more anxious to get scent of it as soon as possible.

Down came one boy alone—instead of about half-a-dozen together, as at ordinary times—and as he entered he said quite quietly and slowly: "Good evening, Sir!" to which he got the hands together, low bow, and sepulchral "Good evening, my boy!" Then came a second lad, also alone; and he said exactly the same, to receive precisely the same elaborate response.

So, with perfect politeness, came down all the eighteen boys, one after another; while every

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single time that simpleton went through his complete performance over again, without seeing that the whole choir was enjoying the joke hugely. Each boy, as he took his place after saying : " Good evening, Sir ! " was nonplussed to see the choir-master standing looking quietly on ; though he, poor man, had the greatest possible difficulty in watching the little comedy right through without an explosion.

Now, didn't such a man deserve everything he got, when in that kind of way he simply asked for trouble ? How devoutly thankful we were, for the sake of the discipline of the choir, when he sought a fresh sphere of labour !

Boys, then, at times, love scoring off the powers that be—and so do other people in more exalted positions. May I whisper a profound secret, of how a certain Precentor and Organist conspired together to do that very thing, with the aid of their innocent choir-boys ?

That I was the Precentor in question goes without saying, and I daresay these words will meet the eye of the organist ; though very likely he'll not mention the fact to anyone, unless he writes and complains to me.

We two were working happily together, and the boys were keen, and absolutely devoted to their skilful organist. But we all suffered many things from a particularly unmusical and commanding vicar, who was possessed of a terrific voice, and whose one idea of successful choir singing was that it should be *fortissimo* from beginning to end.

The dear man had a perfect field day in the psalms and canticles, because we sang them to Gregorians, all well within the compass of his chest voice. When he chose to turn on full steam, he could easily drown the whole choir, which was what he seemed to love doing in any part where it was most effective to sing in subdued tones. He would roar out the words, and at the same moment beat time loudly with his book on the desk in front ; believing all the while that by these gigantic efforts he was saving the choir from a bad break-down, instead of—as he was really doing—spoiling the artistic effect of the whole thing, and upsetting hours of hard work in training, each time he succeeded in getting the boys to yell with him.

Thus it was that we two came to hatch a plot for tripping up his reverence.

Between us we managed to get the boys to understand, with surprisingly little difficulty, what we had in mind. We explained with elaborate care what a wonderful voice the vicar had—a voice which in itself was equal in volume to the combined efforts of any ordinary choir ; so that, when he was pleased to join in the singing, it would naturally give us an opportunity for slackening off a bit, and reserving ourselves for the time when the vicar himself felt that he needed a rest.

So—our eagerly devoured instruction went on (wonderful how those youngsters caught our meaning !) —it would produce a much more

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balanced effect if, the instant the good vicar joined in, at any part of the singing, the rest of the choir, with the organ, immediately dropped to the softest *pp*, bursting forth again into a good round *mf* the moment the chief's voice died away.

The plan was a marked success—the boys took to it at the weekday Services, like ducks to water ; and, without any need for special instruction, the gentlemen of the choir tumbled to it as one man the first Sunday. The surprising thing was that “ the dear vicar ” never smelt a rat, and in a month or so we had cured him of an abominably bad habit of years ; because he gradually became frightened to sing at all, seeing that the moment he made the attempt the whole of the music seemed to collapse. Rest his dear, faithful soul ! He's gone now ; and I hope our little trick may be forgiven.

A great source of trial to the choir-master is the difficulty he so often experiences in securing due order, and a time of quiet, just before proceeding into the church. That five minutes' silence is invaluable as the best possible preparation for the reverence of the Service which is to follow.

I feel sure that long ere this my reader has been generous enough to take it for granted that the utmost reality and reverence in all that is done in God's House has ever been the chief object of those with whom I have been associated for so many years ; and that the incidents I am recording are but accidents, oft-times most distressing and regretted, yet perchance sparkling all the more

with humour because of the solemnity of their setting.

If any few moments are more liable than others to be disturbed by accidents, certainly those last five minutes in the vestry are in the greatest danger: the very smallest thing may utterly wreck their object.

We were standing thus one Sunday evening, and the only sound or movement, beyond the hum of the organ, which was playing softly at our side, was that caused by the organ blower—a character in his way, as, strangely enough, the gentlemen who follow that particular calling generally are—as he raised and lowered his bellows handle with quiet care.

The boys stood in two regular rows, so that it was easy to see one lad was missing; and it happened by chance that he was the son of the blower. This gave me an opportunity of asking on the spot why the boy was absent; though no one was prepared for the sudden and conclusive answer.

“ ‘E couldn’t come, Sir; his ’ead’s all swelled up; he’s bin bit by a mos-*quite*-o ! ”

We went in to the Service without the usual prayer that night: I couldn’t trust myself to say it.

Sometimes there is one particular person—either priest, church official, chorister, or server—to whom many such accidents as I have mentioned can be traced; not because he has the least intention of being either irreverent or

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annoying, but simply because he is built that way and can't help himself.

There was in a well-known church, where it was my good fortune to be Precentor, a gentleman of the choir, possessed of just such a fund of dry humour as my Scotch colleague referred to in the preceding chapter. It simply oozed out of him: he was irrepressible—the life and soul of any social function, such as a choir outing or dinner. Nor did the stream of his wit cease to flow even in the vestry or the church itself: often it was only with the utmost difficulty that you could keep a straight face if you caught his eye at a most solemn moment.

Quiet and serious talks with this gentleman had effect but for a few days or weeks: the natural fun in the man came up to the surface again and ran over, however hard he might struggle to keep it down. I doubt not he made endless resolutions to restrain himself, and to mask his feelings. But out they crept again, and he would say something, apparently unconsciously, which would disturb the equanimity of half the choir, and, as often as not, of the clergy too.

Sometimes you would catch a comment on the preacher's words, spoken doubtless to himself, but audible enough to reach all the ears within a reasonable distance.

One evening the Canon was in the pulpit, and about the middle of his discourse, which gave promise of being of considerable length, he remarked: "But there is no need for me to

occupy your time, my brethren, in labouring this point."

"Well, don't then!" came *sotto voce* from my left: at which I, for one, doubled up in confusion; because it had hit off the situation to a T. We all knew what would follow: an elaborate explanation of the very thing the preacher had just said there was no need to explain.

Another evening, at a Lent Mission Service, the Hymn No. 631 in *Ancient and Modern* ("Oh, the bitter shame and sorrow") had just been announced, and we were finding our places; when the ridiculous name given by the compilers of the book to that hymn, and printed in clear type above it, evidently caught the eye of my lively friend; for I heard him, even from where I stood, whisper to himself: "A tasty tune, this!" Immediately I saw a vision of what had rushed into his mind (though just then neither he nor I ought to have been thinking of anything of the sort) of an inviting country inn on a summer day, in the middle of the morning, after a lovely walk; with new bread and cheese set out on a spotless cloth, and a foaming tankard of ale by its side; for the name of that tune was: "OH, THE BITTER."

This same good man one day met near the church a lad from the choir who was heavy and dull, and who always seemed to be inviting you to shake him soundly and wake him up. Evidently that idea occurred to the gentleman; for in an instant he beckoned the boy, and when he came

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lazily across the road he was received with :
“ Here, Charlie, you’re the very lad I wanted !
Run over the way to the greengrocer’s for me,
as quickly as you can (handing the boy a penny),
will you ? Ask for a pennyworth of mixed nuts,
mostly cocoanuts, and you shall have half of them
yourself ! ”

The lad went, bless you ! though he never heard
the last of it, as long as he was in that choir.

But it was *a propos* of the difficulty of securing
order and silence in the vestry immediately before
Service that I was led to mention my friend of the
ready wit. How next to impossible it was some-
times to go into church with serious faces, when
some remark of his had just troubled the calm,
unruffled sea ! He seemed to have a curious
faculty of being able to speak in an airy, light-
hearted fashion to the most austere and un-
approachable people, with whom no one else would
ever venture on a joke. The Canon, who was
then vicar of the church, was rather of that type ;
and the very thought of a humorous remark in
the vestry when he was present conjured up at
once visions of penal servitude at the very least,
as the only fitting punishment for such an outrage.

So, when one Sunday morning dead silence
reigned, as the Canon entered from his own sanctum
to say the vestry prayer, you may imagine the
effect of the following conversation :

The Canon. “ Good morning, gentlemen ! ”

The Choir. “ Good morning, Sir ! ”

The irrepressible—after the others. “ Good morning, Canon ! I’m sorry to hear from your voice that you are evidently suffering from a severe cold. Now how did you manage to get that, may I ask ? Have you been *drinking out of a damp glass*, or something of that sort ? ”

Tableau !

CHAPTER IV

ON DUTY

THINGS that occur to disturb you when you are "on duty" are always doubly hard to bear; and if your duty happens to be in church, where everything is naturally meant to proceed with solemnity, dignity, and quiet order, then any interruption irritates beyond measure, either your temper or your sense of humour.

If there is one part of a Church Service more than another which seems to be charged with high explosives in this respect it is the sermon. This must surely be the happy hunting ground of the demon of mischief, who, seeing that everyone is expected to be listening with undivided attention, tries his best to create a diversion, either by making the preacher horribly dull, or by setting up some more interesting or amusing counter-attraction.

Think, for instance, how very annoyed a choir-master must find himself getting when he sees that his boys are starting to fidget, or to talk or play, only a few minutes after the sermon begins! Yet, though sometimes, no doubt, they are wholly to blame, in nine cases out of ten the

fault lies with the preacher, as we have said before.

Why, not long ago an American visitor remarked to a companion, after coming away from a Service in one of the old London city churches, which was full of interest as a building, but practically empty so far as the congregation was concerned: "I guess the preacher ought to be subsidized by the police to assist in moving on the traffic."

I know by experience that the preacher is nearly always responsible for any wrong behaviour amongst the choir-boys; because I've been both choir-boy and preacher.

I know also, how, occasionally, you may be taught the lesson not to judge the choir-boys too harshly for their seeming bad conduct during the sermon. Here is an instance of what I mean:

In a certain little country church, hidden away in the hills of Somerset, I found myself taking Evensong one summer Sunday afternoon. Their custom was to have that Service alternately, one Sunday in the afternoon and the next in the evening. It was to enable the vicar to get a short holiday that I was there then: another neighbour had been responsible for the morning.

There was but a small choir of five boys and three men, who all sat on one side of the tiny chancel, the other being taken up with the pulpit and big American organ.

It was a hearty Service, with a good congregation, and what the choir lacked in refinement of singing they made up for in exemplary behaviour—till I got under way with the sermon, when I happened to glance across and see a smile on every choir-boy's face. As they were apparently doing nothing to make one another laugh, and were all looking across in my direction, I began to feel that probably I was the cause of their levity: perhaps my hair was standing up behind, or I had just unconsciously made some ridiculous remark.

I put my hand to my hair, and took instant pains to keep miles from anything light or humorous in what I was saying; but that seemed only to increase the merriment of those boys; for now they were nudging one another and whispering together. Even the staid old choristers who sat behind them were affected by their behaviour: I saw a smile break over their countenances.

My temper was beginning to rise, and I knew that in a few moments I should be tempted to stop my discourse and speak to the choir; but I was anxious not to resort to that, so I contented myself with glaring at them, and turning again towards the people in the church. Imagine my concern when I saw that they also had caught the infection! It was unmistakable: there was a broad grin on the face of the whole congregation!

That finished me. I brought my sermon to an abrupt conclusion, and ended the Service with a very bad grace.

In the vestry, as you may imagine, I rounded on those boys, and gave them a bit of my mind. All the choir stood in awed silence till I had finished, when the biggest boy said quietly and respectfully : " We weren't alaughing at you, Sir. Didn't you see they pigs ? "

Then the full explanation came out. The church was set lengthwise on the side of a hill, the churchyard running up a steep incline above it, which meant that the graves could be seen quite clearly from inside the church, through the little diamond panes of the windows at that side of the building.

The choir were facing those windows, while the people in the nave could look out of them quite comfortably from where they sat ; but up in the pulpit I had my back to them.

It was the ancient story of the preacher's seeing the old woman pulling up a big cabbage stump outside ; only it was reversed, because this time it was the congregation who saw, and the parson who missed it all. And they saw ? Well ! they saw two young pigs, who by some means had got into the churchyard, and were chevying one another round the gravestones, sometimes running into each other and tumbling over together !

Poor, simple country folk ! They tried so hard

to refrain from smiling in church, under the very eye of the parson, and he a stranger. But the antics of those porkers proved too much for them.

I apologized to the choir for the unmerited lecture I had delivered them.

That story had a curious sequel, when the choir-boys must have been as astonished at the preacher as he had been at them on the former occasion.

The next time I found myself in that church was one Sunday evening during the winter, when I exchanged pulpits with the vicar.

In the vestry I think we all remembered the circumstances of my last visit, though none of us ventured to refer to them. Perhaps in the church itself both priest and congregation felt not a little relieved that it was inky black outside, with nothing at all disconcerting to be seen in the churchyard.

The Service followed its usual course, with the utmost solemnity, though I can never hope to explain the insane desire I felt, as soon as I found myself in the pulpit, to turn my head and look out through the window, which was there by my side—I could have touched it without stretching out my hand more than a few inches.

I knew quite well I could see nothing if I looked round ; and I felt, moreover, that if I yielded to the temptation to turn my head, I should by that very action cause everyone present to guess what

was in my mind; and to think of what had happened on that Sunday afternoon we were all anxious just then to forget. With a big effort, therefore, I resisted the impulse, and got on with the sermon.

Yet the harder I tried to fight down the ridiculous desire, the stronger it became; till I found myself thinking more of that than of what I was trying to say.

At last I felt I could hold out no longer; so I determined to take a quick look round, as if some noise attracted my attention. I did so—to receive one of the greatest shocks I have ever in my life experienced! I started so violently that I literally leapt off my feet; for there, pressed up close against the glass, immediately opposite my eyes as I turned them, was a man's face—with a hand each side—peering in through the window!

Some country yokel, who had arrived too late to venture into the church, had wandered round to the high ground at the back, where he straddled across the trench left at the side of the building for draining, to take a peep through the window at what was going on inside, just at the very moment that I turned my head to look out. I wonder who was the more surprised—he or I? I only know I felt the effect of that little shake-up for days after; and what the choir and congregation thought of my strange behaviour I never inquired.

Another incident that occurred away down in the West of England, while I was "on duty" in the pulpit, caused considerable diversion amongst—not the choir-boys in this case, but the choir-ladies, and the congregation as well.

This was in a small Devonshire church, on the borders of Exmoor. The rector was preaching in my own parish for the whole of a Festival Sunday, which meant that I, being the curate, was told off to go and look after his place for the week-end. This I found to be pleasant enough, in such an old-world spot, where the curfew bell was still rung; the church was so historical and the rectory so picturesque and comfortable.

A feature of special interest to me has naturally always been the music in any church, and here I found the most delightful country choir I have ever heard.

The rector—himself a very musical man—had introduced ladies instead of boys; because he found the latter so unsatisfactory, not on the score of incompetence or bad behaviour, but simply on account of their being needed on the farms—at work which so often took them off when they were wanted in church—just as their voices were beginning to be useful after some years of patient training. The experiment was entirely successful, and beautiful Services were the result.

The day before, I had noticed that there was a tall old stone pulpit in the church, but then I

had looked only on the outside of it. When I found myself on Sunday morning mounted in that treasure of bygone days, I felt much less inclined to admire it; for it was narrow, and very tall, so that it seemed to me I could get little more than my head and shoulders above the top of it. I felt horribly uncomfortable up there, and I didn't forget to say so when I appeared at lunch.

My hostess was full of apologies. She explained that the rector was a man of unusual height, who because of that had arranged things so that he could step down instead of up from the top of the stone stairs leading to the pulpit, thus making the floor more than a foot lower than it had been before.

Matters were by that means adjusted for the rector, but whenever a preacher of average height came, the old floor had to be replaced. This they had forgotten to do before I arrived, though I was now assured that everything would be put in its place at once.

The old sexton received instructions to do what was necessary, but I discovered afterwards that he could not find where the proper floor had been stored; so he put in the pulpit a box for me to stand on, with a top so small that it wasn't at all easy to get both my feet comfortably upon it. Still, I was glad to be perched up a little higher: I could move my arms more freely.

All went well till I began to warm up to my

subject, when, completely forgetting where I was standing, I stepped back! Out shot my arms, in an involuntary effort to save myself; and away flew the two pulpit candles, down amongst the people; while crack went my head against the pillar behind!

Both choir and congregation were splendid in the way they restrained their emotions: at least by the time I had picked myself up and mounted that ghastly box again there was perfect composure everywhere.

That, I am sure, would have continued, if I had been allowed to proceed in peace. But it was not to be. No sooner had I collected my scattered thoughts, and begun to speak again, than there was a unique appearance in the gangway just below. Out of the front pew came one of the churchwardens crawling backwards! He had dived in there after one of those candles, and now, when he got up off his knees, he came solemnly forward and *handed up both the wretched things to me in the pulpit!* What in the name of all that is reasonable did that stolid old farmer think I could do with them just then?

The quaintness of the situation dawned upon the congregation, as they saw me standing there with the two useless candles in my hand, and with one accord they broke into a hearty laugh, in which it was an immense relief to me to join. Then I laid down those extinguished lights on

the top of the pulpit, and did my best to finish a very-much-interrupted sermon.

One incident recalls another, and this knocking down of the candles stirs up the memory of the shock I gave the choir and people—but most of all myself—one Sunday morning, when, during the very early days of my ministry, with a nervous movement of my arm I sent flying the glass of water which lived on the pulpit top, but which had been placed that morning by the vergier at the side instead of at the back.

Crash went the glass on the tiles beneath, to my own great confusion and the choir-boys' greater glee!

The odd coincidence about this little smash was, that only a fortnight before I had been preaching in that same pulpit from the text: "He that dasheth in pieces is come up before thy face" (Nahum ii. 1), and I haven't ceased to be thankful it was not that morning the glass came down; else I should never have been able to induce a single soul to believe it was a pure accident.

Not long after Ordination I happened to meet unexpectedly an old college chum. We were both paying a visit to the same cathedral city, so we joined forces, and over lunch we were full of our varied experiences in the new work we had undertaken. The talk turned upon this very subject of startling and disturbing unrehearsed effects during the time we were preaching—or perhaps I had better say, with reference to that

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particular period of our ministry—trying to preach.

I shall always remember the experience my friend then described so vividly as happening during his first sermon.

He was Ordained on Trinity Sunday, which meant that his first Sunday "on duty" was in the summer-time; and in the Mission church in a crowded and poor neighbourhood, where his first effort at oratory had to be made, they were glad, because of the heat, to sit with all the doors and windows open.

The little building had once been a Nonconformist chapel, and it was too small to allow of any sort of chancel: the choir had to be content to sit in the front seats, while the preacher stood, with no kind of pulpit, on the step by the altar rails. But no pulpit was needed, because nothing but an extempore sermon would have been of any use in such a place.

The side of the church gave directly on to the street: there were simply iron railings between it and the pavement; and as the preacher stood before his first congregation that summer evening he could see, through the open door on his left, the ragged little children playing outside in the gutter.

If you knew my friend you would feel with me that even his first sermon must have been worth listening to. He is a man of parts, and has never been at a loss to tackle a difficult situation. How-

ever, on that particular occasion he was certainly the victim of one of those "circumstances over which we have no control." As he reached about the middle of his address, out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a dirty little urchin, who had just rescued a big cabbage stump from some rubbish heap, and was strolling leisurely across the street towards the church, holding his treasure by the thin end, and whirling it round and round.

For a moment the kiddie stood and gazed in at the open door; then without the least warning he let go his stump, and it caught the astonished preacher full in the chest, leaving a big, black blob on his new and spotless surplice!

Who could blame the choir-boys or anyone else for tittering? But don't you admire the coolness of my friend? who, as one of the boys got up to seize the offending cabbage stalk and hurl it out into the street again, said quietly: "No, thank you! We'll leave it there for the present; I think I shall know the young man who threw it in when I meet him again, and then I shall have something to say to him about it."

You have often to summon to your aid every ounce of self-control you possess in order to keep your end up, and go on with your immediate business of preaching, when "the stars in their courses" seem to be fighting against you, and the tension is at breaking point.

I always feel ready to give the palm to the friend of whom I told you in the previous chapter

—he who has now become so famous a preacher, and who was then in charge of the district church where the lady organist had some difficulty with the pedals. I'll tell you why I think he deserves the palm.

The church in which he first ministered was at that time only partly built—the east end was all that was standing. This meant that the congregation sat in what is now the chancel, while the choir had their seats in the sanctuary, their chairs running back on either side of the altar to the east wall. The preacher stood at a simple desk, which also served as the lectern, and was placed on one side at the bottom of the altar steps. From this, as he faced the people, he had immediately on his left a row of choir-boys, and behind them a row of men.

It was the first Sunday I had attended that church, and I had never before heard my friend preach ; so I was all attention, as I sat listening, somewhere about the middle of the congregation.

After the Service I went in with the preacher to supper, and I felt justified in congratulating him heartily on a sermon that had interested everyone from start to finish, and that would certainly have been a great help to many.

"It's very kind of you, old chap, to talk like that," said he, "but did you notice that I rather hesitated towards the close of what I was saying?"

"No, indeed," I replied. "I noticed nothing of the kind. On the contrary, I was struck with

the very rapid rate at which you spoke ; rather as if you were trying to get a half-hour's sermon into less than twenty minutes. I certainly detected no sort of hesitation."

" Well ! " he persisted, " I did hesitate ; though perhaps I managed to cover it up a bit by coughing rather more than was strictly necessary just then. This is what happened.

" As soon as everybody had settled down and I had got fairly started, I detected some little distraction amongst the choir-boys on my left ; but when I glared at them they sat still and attended. This, however, didn't continue very long ; for in a few minutes I saw one boy near me nudge another, and in a quick glance I spotted the reason.

" You may have seen on my side of the choir a very stout man, sitting about the middle of the row. Well ! he's not a bad singer, but he's abominably bad-tempered, and the boys detest him. They've given him the nickname of ' Blunderbuss,' and they make him furious by calling him this under their breath, sometimes at most inconvenient moments. In return, he'll box their ears, if ever he can get a chance, or complain of them if he happens to catch them misbehaving. So there's no love lost between them, and the boys are always on the look-out to get their own back.

" An extraordinarily good chance had suddenly presented itself when I scowled at the lads a second

time this evening; for old 'Blunderbuss' had crossed his legs, and allowed one of his feet to stretch out between two of the chairs in front. I knew there would be trouble, but I didn't wish to interrupt the flow of my sermon to take any notice of it.

"Then I saw that a whisper was going along the row of boys to the top, and, presently, that something was being passed surreptitiously from hand to hand. O! how horribly it distracted my thoughts! But it fascinated me at the same time.

"Imagine my feelings, when, though I was still proceeding, as you say, rapidly, I tumbled to it that what had been travelling down that row was a pin! There it was—I knew it, though I couldn't see it—in the hand of the little demon immediately at my elbow! He sat looking straight up into my face, as if he were drinking in every word I was uttering; yet all the time he held that pin, business end down, just over the ankle by the side of his chair!

"Should I stop my sermon, and order this boy out of the church? That was what flashed through my mind. But no! I couldn't. All the devilry of my own boyhood seemed to return and come up to the surface just then; and I felt the bitterness of the disappointment, if I had been the boy holding that pin and some idiot of a parson had at the last moment deprived me of my revenge on old 'Blunderbuss.' I felt, too, that if I stopped

to dismiss that boy, the interruption would ruin my whole sermon ; for I could never hope to get back again the same atmosphere of close attention and interest if it were once allowed to flag. So I just went on, as hard as I could go, and hoped there would not be much waiting !

“ There wasn’t. With another side glance I saw the hand descend with a vicious dig, and the leg shoot back like lightning, as I caught a smothered ‘ D—— ! ’

“ It was just then, old fellow, that I rather hesitated.”

Sermon-time is what we are specially thinking of now. How do choir-boys wile away the half-hour of a dull sermon ? They have many devices to that end, some of which are managed quietly, while others call down the wrath of clergy and choir-masters, because they are either noisy or noticeable.

I have already mentioned that one of our favourite occupations at such times, when I was a boy, was to send some verse or sentence in a whisper down the row and back, to see how it got twisted on the journey, and if it could be said without laughing. I gave an example ; but another occurs to me now—rather a favourite one, perhaps, because it raised such a delightful vision of our own portly bishop jumping high in the air under such pointed treatment. There’s nothing new about the verse ; but there was a spice of adventure in attempting to repeat it in

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the quiet of a sermon, without a giggle or a smile :

There were three young ladies of Birmingham ;
I know a sad story concerning 'em :
 They stuck needles and pins
 In the reverend shins
Of the bishop engaged in Confirming 'em.

Writing was another dodge ; and these things were all of them "dodges," seeing we had to pull them off beneath the keen glances of many watching eyes.

An odd piece of paper was a boon during some discourses ; for on it we could play "Noughts and Crosses" in perfect silence, and, if we looked slippy, under the very eye of the Precentor himself. I needn't explain the game, because it is thoroughly well-known to anyone who has ever been a choir-boy. If you personally are ignorant of the charm of its simplicity, you can get full information about it from the first chorister you meet.

Another type of writing during dull sermons was the composition of Nonsense Verses. One boy would suggest the first line, which was whispered down the row, and then the rest (chiefly the bigger boys, of course) were expected to finish the verse in their own words, on any bits of paper they could find.

Even at this distance of time I can hear the first line being whispered one Sunday evening—an

old beginning, to which we were to attach a new ending. I remember my own effort that night : here it is :

There was a young lady of Crewe,
Whose distress was quite painful to view :
First she leapt to her feet,
Then she hopped on the seat—
It was only a mouse in her pew.

Perhaps I recollect this masterpiece because the same first line was chosen another day, when I made a second attack upon it, with this result :

There was a young lady of Crewe,
Whose bicycle travelled askew ;
She demolished the can
Of a baked-'tater man,
And his words, although pointed, were few.

Writing in psalters and other choir-books is always a snare, whatever punishment may be meted out to the culprits. Pick up almost any book in any choir, and you'll rarely find it free from scribbling ; even if it only has on the title-page the owner's name.

Why, those last three words recall the most favoured of all the legends we delighted to inscribe in books we had a particular fancy for—a choir-boy loves his own books and no one else's. The inscription (Do you remember it? Didn't you yourself plaster the inside cover of more than one volume with it, when you were younger?) ran :

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Steal not this book, for fear of shame ;
For in it is the owner's name ;
And if you do, the Lord will say :
" Where is that book you stole away ? "
And if you say you cannot tell,
The Lord will cast you into HELL !!!

It smacks of the Hun—that drastic punishment : doesn't it ? But then, all boys—and some people would be prepared to say, " especially choir-boys ! "—have a dash of the Hun about them.

I once pounced upon a youngster, because I caught him writing during the sermon, and sent him back into the church to bring me the book he had been scribbling in. This he did in a crest-fallen fashion, and, though I was obliged to frown and look severe, I couldn't help being amused, when he opened before me the book at the hymn : " Ten thousand times ten thousand." By the side of these words he had been neatly working out a multiplication sum : $10,000 \times 10,000$. I expect that lad has since turned out to be a precise and accurate man of business.

Sometimes as choir-boys we worked out problems during dull sermons. Here is one in the form of a Nonsense Verse. Tradition says it emanated from the mind of a bishop, but about that I cannot speak with authority :

She frowned on him and called him MR.,
Because that night for fun he'd KR. ;
 So, just for spite,
 That very night
The naughty MR. KR. SR.

Reading "penny dreadfuls" you sometimes come across in sermon-time, but, in my experience, not often; very likely because such things are kept in the pocket of the coat which is taken off and left in the vestry.

Occasionally, too, cuttings from papers and books will be passed round the choir; while the rest of the people are trying their best to keep awake. An extract from a local paper of the day before, I remember going along our side one Palm Sunday morning. Such a startling announcement we choir-boys took a violent interest in; for it was still fresh in our minds how that very day the year before, at a neighbouring church, there was no end of a fuss; because the good vicar ventured on the enormity of presenting a little piece of palm to any of the congregation who would accept it; explaining in his sermon the simple lessons such a thing had to teach.

It was about this church that the paragraph gave such an alarming notice, which during the sermon we read with awe. We wondered whether it might not result in a free fight; and some of us were a bit disappointed it was not our own church that was referred to. The note was in this strain:

"We understand on good authority that to-morrow morning, being Palm Sunday, the clergy and choir of St Mary's will enter the church carrying palms in their hands, and wearing crowns upon their heads."

After the Service, we set about inquiring what had happened at St Mary's while our own peaceful Mattins had been dragging on. We discovered that the church was packed to overflowing, there being not even standing room when the Service began. The note in the paper had its due effect ; but the huge congregation was doomed to bitter disappointment ; for the choir came in as they ever did, with no added finery of any sort. Not even the little palm crosses of the year before were distributed.

We all voted that paper a "rag," for printing news, on such high authority, which turned out to be false.

Picture our surprise the next Sunday, when more than one boy turned up with a cutting from the previous day's paper, which none of us could wait till sermon-time to read. It was in words like these :

"We offer sincere apologies to our readers for unintentionally misleading them by a note in last Saturday's issue, about the Service in St Mary's church the following morning. We also regret that the congregation there should have been inconvenienced by the influx of a crowd of sightseers, which our unfortunate notice caused. It now appears that we were the victims of a foolish hoax, contained in the letter of a well-known correspondent, whom we never suspected of such an action. In answer to our expostulations, he has simply written as follows :

“ ‘ The information contained in my communication about last Sunday’s morning Service at St Mary’s church was perfectly correct, for I have yet to discover either the clergyman or the chorister who has ever entered that or any other church *without* palms in his hands and a crown on his head.’ ”

Clay modelling became a fashionable sermon pastime once. There was a brick-kiln not many miles from the church, where supplies of fresh clay were always forthcoming; and a lump of this provided quiet and interesting employment during many a dreary preachment.

We had great competitions in these works of plastic art; all the boys setting out to make the same thing; the models being produced afterwards for exhibition and award amongst ourselves.

One favourite subject for reproduction was a coffin, with its lid and its occupant complete. I suppose there was something about this which seemed to be in keeping with the solemnity of the place and occasion of the modelling. We turned out these gruesome relics literally by the dozen !

Sometimes even during the sermon of an interesting preacher we would secretly produce our material and set to work. Little did the man in the pulpit dream that the subject of his address was being translated into clay. St John Baptist’s head in a charger; the lost sheep; St Peter’s

keys ; the five barley loaves and two small fishes ; the widow's mite ; the thirty pieces of silver, and many other like things we produced in this way.

Why, all this modern system of Reformed Sunday Schools, with its Kindergarten, and the use of Plasticine and other materials, you see, we anticipated by many years. Only we never received any credit for it, and even this bare record of our achievements is more than tardy in its appearance.

The biggest sermon-time row I was ever in for as a choir-boy had certain elements of novelty about it.

There was another lad who with me had become rather chummy with the quaint old bird who had charge of the heating apparatus of the large church.

I think it was a little matter of an ounce of Shag, judiciously conveyed to this old man one evening, that gained us admittance to the mysterious cavern beneath the church, where he stoked up his fires ; and having once been down to these regions, we were often to be found there. We could manage this only when we gave the other boys the slip ; for we knew that if they once got wind of this privilege of ours the game would soon be up, and it would be our preserve no longer. Two boys might be all right to make a little concession to, but even old Tommy would have drawn the line at twenty.

One evening, when the furnaces were full, and the stoker was ready to depart, we two youngsters were all attention as we saw Tommy rake out from the hot ashes beneath one of his fires a huge potato, which he proceeded to cut open, season with pepper and salt, and then devour with considerable relish. We found, after many questions, that this was his custom all through the cold winter. If he put the potato there when he began his banking and tidying up, it was well cooked by the time he had finished.

That little bit of information was quite sufficient for two average choir-boys, especially as those very little rascals had been wide-awake enough by that time to discover where the old man hid his big key of the stoke-hole door. The next night we both arrived very early for the choir-practice, and down to the depths below we tumbled, with a big potato each, which we deposited in the ashes under the second furnace. During the rehearsal we had searchings of heart as to whether old Tommy would choose that fire for his own potato when he came, and so discover that we were up to the same game ; but as soon as we could escape, we darted down again, to find our hidden treasure quite safe.

But we were faced with a difficulty. It happened to be a Saint's night ; when there was a Sung Evensong and Sermon at 7.30, for which the bell was even then ringing. There was no time to eat

our potatoes before the Service, and we knew it would be too late to be prowling about below when it was over. We therefore pocketed our first experiment in cookery, and hurried up again to the vestry. Then it was that I took the fatal step. What possessed me to do it I can't imagine, but I transferred that hot potato from my coat to my cassock pocket, just as the word was given to form into line.

The sermon that evening was preached by the junior curate, who was far too nervous to interest even himself in his subject; so that the minds of mere boys were very quickly switched off in a dozen other directions. My own centred upon that unlucky potato, and very quietly I hauled it out for inspection. Then I wondered whether it was really cooked through in the time we had left it in the ashes—and so on, and so on, till at last I could resist the temptation no longer; but with a new knife, which I happened to have in another pocket, I cut the thing open!

Heavens! what was the matter? Up from that sickening potato, as the two halves fell apart, rose an alarming column of steam, which scared not only me, but the other boys near. Like a shot the wretched thing was back in my pocket, and with a face as white as a sheet I finished that Service.

Had I escaped detection? That was my one thought. There wasn't long to wait for an answer

when we returned to the vestry. I heard my name called by the Precentor, and I knew I was in for a big thing, as I followed him into the priests' sanctum. Then there began a pointed catechism :

" What was that smoke rising from your stall during the sermon ? "

" There was no smoke, Sir."

" No smoke ? Why I saw it with my own eyes, boy."

" That wasn't smoke, Sir."

" Not smoke ? Then what was it, pray ? "

" Steam, Sir."

" Steam ? My boy, what in the world are you talking about ? Just explain yourself, and as quickly as you can ! "

It all had to come out—the potato, and the knife, and the explanation : at least as much of the explanation as I felt to be good for the Precentor ; for I was anxious above all to save that little privilege of going down to the furnaces. So I just said that I had brought the potato to church with me—see ?

There was the Dickens to pay—I remember that ; but I also remember the satisfaction I felt in not giving away either the stoke-hole or my chum. He was jolly decent over that part of the business ; for he gave me half his potato, when I got out ; because I'd lost my own, and my new pocket-knife into the bargain.

The recollection of this hot potato in my own

pocket, makes me think of the extraordinary things choir-boys will carry about in their cassocks. A tour of investigation in this direction will reveal such a nasty, sticky collection of articles as you would scarcely credit.

Perhaps the most startling novelty I ever saw a chum produce from his pocket during sermon-time was a white rat, which he had taught to do any number of tricks ! What would the preacher have said if he had seen that boy sending his rat up one sleeve, and wriggling about till it came down the other ?

But in classing that rat as the greatest novelty in this direction, I am forgetting one little imp—a very fountain of mischief—who, because he had been greatly offended by another boy, one Sunday night brought with him to church a raw egg, which he succeeded in dropping in the other lad's cassock pocket. Then, as we were leaving the vestry in procession to the chancel, he gave the youngster a punch just where he knew that egg was. You may imagine the result the first time the handkerchief came out !

After experiences of this sort, you will not be surprised that, for some years, I have made it a rule that no choir-boy's cassock shall possess a pocket at all ; they simply have a long slit on either side, through which the hand may be passed to the garment underneath.

But sermon-time is not the only time that you are "on duty" in church : in other parts of the

Service, too, an accident may occur at any moment ; when the choir and congregation may be hard put to it to remain serious.

How often it is that just a second's absent-mindedness on someone's part will upset the gravity of everybody in church !

Here is a simple instance. Being the Precentor it fell to my lot ninety-nine times out of a hundred to sing the Service ; but once, on that hundredth time, a priest on the opposite side of the chancel was conducting Evensong. At the end of the Creed—when the man who is taking the Office turns round from facing East, and looks towards the people while he sings the Versicle that immediately follows—that priest turned and, with outstretched hands, intoned the words : “ The Lord be with you.” But, by force of long habit, and in a moment of absent-mindedness (thinking of the points of my coming sermon, instead of what I was doing), I turned also, at the same instant, and delivered the same salutation, on the same notes, and with the same gesture !

A small matter, indeed, but the effect on the choir was electrical ; and it was a mercy that the next thing we all had to do was to kneel down. I myself was covered with confusion, but my colleague on the opposite side deserved special mention in dispatches for the unruffled way in which he proceeded with the Service.

An absent-minded choir-boy in the same church, not long after, caused another ripple to pass over

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the face of everybody in the chancel, and of all in the church who caught sight of him.

We were singing the psalms one Sunday evening, when I discovered that the sacristan, by mistake, had placed the book containing the notices to be given out, on the Canon's stall opposite, instead of on my own. I was obliged, therefore, to send a boy to fetch it for me—a thing I hate doing; because any unnecessary walking about of officials during the Service tends to distraction.

The lad in front of me that night was a new boy, rather frightened at being sent on such an errand, when so many eyes were upon him. However, he reached the other side in safety, stopping on his way (as was our custom) to turn and bow reverently towards the altar, as he passed in front of it. But on his return with the book, he seemed to be seized with sudden nervousness; for when he got to the middle of the chancel, he stood still, absent-mindedly turned round, with his back to the altar, and *made a profound reverence towards the congregation!*

I am shaking with laughter at the memory of that little accident even now, as I write these words; so you may guess the effect it had upon everyone who saw it that night.

An old Canon used to come fairly often to preach in the great church I loved so much as a choir-boy. We knew him well, and enjoyed his coming; not that we understood anything he had to say—

he never deigned to descend to our level of intelligence, but we liked to hear his thunderous voice. So loudly did he bellow that he awoke all the echoes of the building, and thus ended in shouting himself down; though he usually took about three quarters of an hour to do so.

It was a magnificent feat of endurance, both on the Canon's part, and on that of the long-suffering congregation; and we boys, who weren't pretending for a moment to listen to what he said, felt rather like spectators at a football match—watching both sides in the contest.

This doughty warrior generally asked, too, if he might read one of the Lessons, so as to "feel the acoustic properties of the building" before he entered upon his sermon—as I overheard him say to the Precentor once; though I hadn't the remotest idea in those days what he meant. He was evidently so taken up with those profound mysteries one Sunday, when he came to preach for some Diocesan work, that he seemed to lose his way about in the Service altogether. Such an absent-minded exhibition we boys had never before seen.

We were nearing the end of the last psalm but one, when we were tickled to see the old gentleman had mistaken it for the last psalm; for he started with great pomp from his stall, and came, like a ship in full sail, down the long chancel to read the Lesson; only to be stopped and turned back by the vergers with his silver wand. Then, at the

right moment, the procession had to begin all over again.

But this wasn't all. Those "acoustic" things were evidently getting on the worthy Canon's nerves. While we were singing the first hymn he must have imagined we were well on with the second; seeing that he sallied forth with even greater dignity, on his way to the pulpit. Once more the verger went and stood in the way against him, inducing him to return till a more convenient season.

When finally the verger succeeded in towing his charge, at the correct time, down through the choir-stalls, we boys were very near clapping the pair of them; in fact I distinctly heard the lad next to me sing out under his breath, as the couple passed: "Hooray! You've got a bull's-eye this time!"

Was it altogether absent-mindedness, I wonder, that accounted for this next delicious little experience? I'll leave you to judge for yourself.

Twenty years ago, it must be, I was in charge of a Mission in the poor part of a big parish; and was anxious to try the effect of limelight lantern pictures in the church on Good Friday night. In those days such a thing was looked upon with grave apprehension, as savouring of an entertainment; but I was convinced that, if properly handled, it ought to be of the greatest value (as years of experience have since proved to be the case), and I was determined to give it a genuine

trial ; so as to see if it were not possible to produce a really sacred Service, with the aid of the most beautiful lantern pictures that could be procured.

To this end I decided to hide the lantern altogether from the view of the congregation, by placing it behind the sheet (which was to be hung in the chancel arch), back by the altar, stretching a curtain all along the low chancel screen beneath the sheet. This would mean that before the Service, the sheet would have to be made wet to allow more light to pass through it ; because the lantern would be on one side of it, and the congregation on the other.

I had an excellent limelight apparatus of my own, but I needed a skilful operator on whom I might absolutely rely. Whom could I ask to help in this matter ?

One of my churchwardens—an eminent medical specialist—was particularly keen on amusing his own children with a lantern he had : I had often helped him at it, for we were great friends. He was a breezy Irishman—generous, good-hearted, and always ready to lend a hand in anything connected with the Church or the poor. Off I went to this stand-by, and got his willing promise of assistance.

“ But, Mac,” said I, “ you mustn’t mind if I’m a bit of a martinet over it. I’m so anxious to have no suspicion of failure, that I hope you’ll be able to spare time to go over with me to the church

and have a rehearsal beforehand. I want everything done just my way, even if you think yours may be better. Are you game ? ”

“ My dear boy,” came his cheery response, “ I’ll be just an infant in your hands, and you can rely on me, for the credit of old Ireland, to pull you through.”

That was enough for any man. We fixed up a time to meet at the church, and I went through the whole thing with the good doctor—showed him how to manipulate the limelight, how to change the slides silently as I desired, and how to damp the sheet with a sponge, a few feet] at a time, as it was pulled up into position.

I explained to my friend that I should be obliged to leave all these arrangements on Good Friday evening in his hands, because just before the Service I should be out with the choir, going through the streets, urging the people to come on after us into church ; and that when I got back I should want everything ready to begin on the tick.

The man of medicine was an apt pupil ; for he naturally knew far more about the scientific part of the business than I did myself ; and he left me that night with the renewed assurance that, for the honour of old Ireland—whatever that may have had to do with it—I should not be let down.

Good Friday came, and I saw that my learned assistant was busy in the church, when we set out for the street Procession. On our return an hour later, I found the place packed with people, and

my friend eager with the news that everything was in order and ready for an immediate start. He said he would just go and give a last look round, while I arranged the choir in the front seats of the nave.

When I glanced out of the vestry again, to see if the moment had arrived for me to enter and begin the Service, such a vision presented itself as I could never hope to describe adequately in writing. With a face which must have betrayed my dismay, I crept round into the chancel and whispered: "Mac, my dear fellow, do you know what the people are doing on the other side of the sheet?"

"What should they be doing, indeed, if they're not waiting for the Service to begin?" he replied.

"Well! They're sitting there *with their umbrellas up*: that's what they're doing, Mac!" I said, as my heart sank at the thought of all my carefully-laid plans being wrecked.

That dear, good chap had conceived a far better plan than my own for damping the sheet; there he stood, *with a garden syringe in his hand, squirting water from a bucket at it!*

When the operator aimed anywhere near the top of the sheet, half the water went over and came down on the innocent and bewildered congregation, whose only defence lay in putting up their umbrellas—where they chanced to possess them.

Poor Mac! As it dawned on him what was

happening, he kicked over the pail, in doubling up quickly to save himself from roaring out loud with laughter ; and the rest of the water ran down the chancel steps in a stream !

Thank heaven we were both effectually hidden behind that sheet and curtain !

In the end the Service went off quietly and most reverently, coming up to all my expectations ; but that was the first and last occasion on which I used a wet sheet for any Lantern Service or Lecture.

Mac was a brick afterwards ; for he stood a complete set of new choir books, in place of those he had ruined through the water's splashing back on them as they lay on the stalls that evening.

To this day I believe it never occurred to the people in front, or even to those choir-boys, exactly what was happening behind that mysterious sheet.

More disconcerting to the choir than momentary lapses into absent-mindedness are some of the really alarming interruptions that occasionally happen when they are " on duty " in church.

The most common thing of this kind is, of course, a bad faint or fit somewhere in the congregation. Such events even choir-boys grow fairly accustomed to, and the disturbance affects them but little.

A piercing scream from a lady in the church one Sunday evening, when there was a big gathering of well over a thousand people, was certainly startling ; but the choir-boys went manfully on with the psalms. This I rather wondered at,

because they had already been severely tried by a wretched little fox terrier, who had slipped in at one of the open doors—it was summer-time, and we needed all the air we could get.

After wandering about the church, resisting brave endeavours of various officials in the aisles to catch him, the dog found his way to the chancel, where he strolled along between the stalls, looking up at the boys with a frightened and appealing expression, while they struggled to stick to their singing.

It was just after the animal had disappeared and we breathed freely again, that the shrill screech came from down the church. Fortunately for all of us in the choir, we could not see what had actually happened; but someone immediately behind the lady who shrieked out told me the truth of it when the Service was over.

That terrier, having got into the main gangway of the nave, dodged a determined and active sidesman, by darting into a seat. As the people were standing for the singing of the psalms, this good man was able to crush in after the dog, who slipped through to the row in front, immediately the man bent down to seize him.

The ladies were then wearing their white summer frocks, with hose and shoes to match. That caused the trouble; for the perspiring official, now on his knees, reached under the seat and made an angry grab at what he took to be the dog, but at what proved to be *a lady's ankle!*

Then down came the lady with a rush; and it was her scream—poor, innocent, astonished young thing—that, even more than the escapades of the dog, enlivened the quiet and solemn chanting.

Quite stirring, too, is the sudden cutting off of all the lights, when the church is full. Personally I have found, in such an unexpected fix, that the choristers are splendidly “on the spot,” so as to grasp the situation and carry things through without a hitch.

One evening the choir finished the anthem, and another night, with the backing of the congregation, a hymn, when the gas failed in the middle.

The electric light gave out once, when I was reading the Second Lesson, but the subject happened to be one of the Parables, which I knew by heart, so that I could finish it in the dark. Then the choir rose, in the coolest possible fashion, and sang the *Nunc Dimittis*, going on from that to the Creed, without the slightest hesitation. I was hoping that my memory would not play me false in the prayers that followed, when, to everyone’s relief, the light came on again.

Decidedly more alarming was a unique experience at a large church in the north of England. The chief Service of the Sunday there was the Sung Eucharist, with the sermon in its proper place. That morning I happened to be the preacher, and my subject—the Personality of Satan—was sug-

gested by the Epistle for the day, which was the Third Sunday after Trinity.

The weather was fair when we entered the church, but during the Service the sky became overcast. Evidently a storm was brewing; for so black were the clouds that it was necessary to turn up the lights for the singing of the *Credo*. These were put out again during the sermon which followed, except one chandelier immediately over the pulpit.

We were all conscious of a curious tension—both speaker and listeners, because of the uncanny darkness at such an hour; while the theme of the sermon only added to the bizarre effect. The very silence of the people—usually such an inspiration and help to a preacher—seemed to induce in me that morning only a feeling of apprehension; so that I never was more pleased to reach the last point of my discourse, and to know that it was drawing to a close.

Then, suddenly, without an instant's warning, there was a loud report in the church, as if—so several members of the congregation afterwards said—someone at the back of the building had fired a revolver at the preacher; and the heavy chandelier came down with a crash upon the stone pulpit, grazing me as it fell, and smashing, with an additional report, the half-dozen electric bulbs that were on it!

This was accompanied, in the same breath, by a terrific clap of thunder, which seemed to shake

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the whole place ! And we found ourselves with no lights at all, except the candles burning on the distant altar.

Several ladies, and some of the choir-boys, rose with a scream ; and one devout old soul, sitting immediately under the pulpit, sprang right on to her seat, and waving her arms wildly, cried out : " Oh, the devil ! the devil ! "

It was a shock and a scene defying description ; but the next moment came in deep commanding tones from the vicar in the *sedilia* : " Boys, sit down at once ! There's nothing to be frightened about ! Mr Preacher, why don't you go on ? "

Easier said than done ; but that steady voice of the vicar just saved the situation, and averted what might have been a panic. I fear my " going on " was a lame affair, though it gave a minute or two for us all to collect ourselves, and for the churchwardens to turn on the other lights again.

We afterwards discovered that a thunder-cloud, in passing over the church, had so overcharged the electric wires that one of them fused, where the fitting was faulty, in the roof above the pulpit corona, which came tumbling down in consequence.

The next day I had a long letter of abject apology from that frail and refined old lady, who said she had never made use of such an expression in her life before ; but at that terrifying moment she really thought His Satanic Majesty had appeared, to visit us with summary punishment for the hard things we had said about him.

A distressing and dangerous thing occurred some years ago, soon after the morning Service had begun. It was cold, wintry weather, and the vicar had had the heating apparatus inspected only the day before. The fires were lit overnight, and the church was comfortably warm that Sunday morning; when suddenly a tremendous explosion resounded in every part of the building, and a great jet of water and steam blew right up to the roof, from the hot-water pipes running along the floor.

It was indeed a grim accident, and the mercy was that no one was killed or injured. The people scattered in all directions, and some of the terrified choir-boys rushed pell-mell into the vestry.

The vicar, seeing how greatly upset everyone was, and that steam was still issuing from the burst pipe, wisely announced that the Service would close at once.

It was found that the mechanic who had been supposed to overhaul the apparatus knew nothing whatever about it, but had actually fastened up the only outlet for the water and steam. There might have been a fearful catastrophe in the church that morning.

A startling incident occurred one Sunday evening, when everyone in the church—including the choir-boys—was listening in breathless silence to a visitor's sermon of the most absorbing interest!

Without any kind of warning, but with most

extraordinary agility a man, about the middle of the congregation, leapt upon his chair, and, at the top of his voice, as he wildly waved his arms, shouted over and over again: "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Poor fellow! He turned out to be a harmless lunatic, who had never before attempted to interrupt a Service; but that evening he created a dreadful scene, and it took six or more of the sidesmen to carry him from the church.

Distinctly alarming was a little sort of aside, just before the sermon one afternoon, in our cathedral. Yet, for those of us in the choir who saw it happen, there was a decided element of humour about it.

A special preacher was occupying the pulpit for the first time that day, and we agreed that whoever selected him deserved a vote of thanks for choosing someone who knew how to deliver a decent sermon. That part of it was all right; but it was the little bit that came immediately before the address that caused more than one person present great concern.

Evidently wrapped up in the subject of his discourse, the preacher entirely overlooked the fact that he was in a cathedral, where no one moves about to do anything except a vergers with his verge goes solemnly in front. The result was that this parson got a lead, because the attendant was not prepared for such an early start—during the first, instead of nearly the last verse of the

hymn—and the preacher kept his lead right up to the pulpit, though the gentleman with the wand and gown ran a close second.

Up the steps (there were a good many to that pulpit) trotted the new-comer, whose first concern on reaching the top was to shake violently the wooden desk with its cushion, obviously to see if it was portable. When he found he could move it easily, he lifted it up, to place it somewhere behind, out of his way.

It never dawned on the preacher that the verger had followed him up the pulpit steps, to close the door behind him—doors in such places are rarely found except in cathedrals; so, when he swung that fairly heavy desk round smartly, he managed to catch the astounded man full on the side of the head with it, and sent him tumbling headlong down the stairs. The desk and cushion went after him; and so did the distressed parson, who ran down with alarm, to see if anything in the nature of first aid were needed in consequence of his clumsiness.

The marvel was that anybody recovered sufficiently to attend to the sermon at all; but the preacher was a sporting parson, and, seeing how he pulled himself together and went on with his job, made us take the cue from him, and sit still and do our bit of listening.

It is a pretty far cry from that cathedral Service to the very ornate High Celebration in which I took part, as one of the three officiating priests,

many years after, and many miles away: they are connected only by the fact that a disturbing accident happened at both.

On those Festival occasions the sanctuary was profusely decorated, in the church I am now speaking of. We had—shades of Percy Dearmer!—besides the six candles in a row at the back of the altar, six other tall, thin tapers, in equally tall and thin candlesticks, arranged three a side on the corners of the steps leading up to the altar; and round about them all were wonderful erections of plants and vases of flowers.

It was gorgeous; and the Service itself was as elaborate as its setting. That's why the vicar, though he loved those particular Services, would never take part in them himself. He confessed that once he had attempted to do so, but that he and everyone had learnt such a lesson then that it would have been criminal to repeat the experiment. So, for our third priest we had to ask the help of a man who lived in the parish, and who was always ready to give us any assistance.

The Festival I am thinking of fell on a day when our kind neighbour was away, and I was obliged to look for someone else to take his place. Just then a venerable old clergyman, with a long white beard, was staying near the church, and attending it regularly; so I went off in search of him. I told him I hesitated to ask for his help, because I did not know whether he would

feel altogether at home with the type of Service we had on Great Festivals.

"My dear boy," came the unexpected reply, "I was used to all this sort of thing long before you were born; don't you worry about me! I'll come and help you with the greatest of pleasure."

With that, I ventured to descend to details and to suggest that it would be an advantage if he could spare half an hour to go into the church and run through the ceremonial with me, by way of rehearsal; seeing that there might be more than one little thing we did rather differently from what he had previously been accustomed to.

But no! The old gentleman was surprisingly cocksure of himself, and nothing would induce him to see that it would be safer to try over on the spot what he would have to do.

I had searchings of heart as I left the old man that afternoon, and many more searchings when at last, after much difficulty, I got him properly vested on the day itself, and then saw the state of nervousness he was working himself up into before the Service even began. However, we had to make the best of it.

From the time we entered the sanctuary I discovered the ancient one's peculiar fondness for bowing elaborately at anybody, and anything, or at any moment of doubt.

There was nothing for our friend to do on his own, so to speak, till we came to where he had

to go up and move the Service-book from the south to the north end of the altar, before the singing of the Gospel. This, with many bowings, he managed quite successfully; till he had deposited the desk in the right place. Then he stepped back to make the most profound of all his bows. But, unfortunately—not knowing his way about on those steps, which was the reason for my suggesting a rehearsal, of course—he quite forgot how little room there was behind him just there; so he stepped backwards on to nothing, lost his balance, and simply *sat down in the midst of those three tall candles and their surrounding flowers!*

That was a crash, and no mistake! The candles, and pots, and vases, and flowers went in every direction! But our greatest concern was for the old priest himself, whom clergy and servers together rushed to assist. However, he came up smiling, and at once began a most profuse apology; starting to explain how it all happened, in a voice which only the singing of the *Sequence* hymn just then prevented the whole choir from hearing.

In the meantime the servers hurriedly picked up and replaced what they could from the wreck, and after they had done their best we prepared to proceed with the Service. But when we looked for him to assist, we found our venerable friend on his hands and knees, crawling about on the sanctuary carpet.

I was seriously concerned; thinking that the old gentleman must have been stunned and dazed by his fall. I beckoned, therefore, to the chief server; and he went and touched him on the shoulder, and asked if he were hurt.

“No, thank you!” came in tones which this time were distinctly heard by all the choir—
“No, I’m not hurt at all, thank you! *I was merely looking for my spectacles!*”

CHAPTER V

OFF DUTY

“OFF duty!” There’s a delicious sound about those words, especially to choir-boys, when they’ve had a heavy time “on” at Services, or rehearsals, or both.

To be off duty for a chorister does not necessarily imply that he gets away from the church or vestry immediately; in fact these sacred precincts are the scene of many adventures when work is over.

Assistant organists and other organ students are a source of not a little anxiety or joy, according to whose point of view you regard them from—of anxiety to the choir-master, or joy to the choir-boys. Like all other assistant masters, these understudies of the organist have to win their spurs with their pupils, who very quickly find out what stuff they are made of, and deal with them accordingly. Some command obedience, respect, and willing work from the first; others acquire the gift of obtaining these things from their boys only after hard, grinding perseverance in the cultivation of it; while others, again, never reach such a blissful state of smoothness and delight in their labours.

You can't blame the choir-boys for the deficiencies of their teachers; they will respond with alacrity to the guidance of anyone who knows how to guide them; but if their master cannot lead them, there's not the slightest doubt they'll very quickly lead him; and in thorny paths he never dreamed of treading.

My first choir-master had two assistants, one of whom we boys loved, though he worked us hard, and always managed to nip our enterprising plans for disorder in the bud. But the other—well, none of us cared a brass farthing for him, and we led him a dog's life. Yet I am bound to confess that he richly deserved all he ever got.

This little man was nervy and fussy, and because he walked with a quaint, hurried step, which was almost a run, he was always known as "Trotter." He was well aware of this, yet he never attempted to alter his peculiarity, so as to make things easier for himself. It was the same in other things; you could play up to him again and again, and he was never prepared for the old trick you had brought off a dozen times before.

For instance, this pupil was often glad to avail himself of the help of a couple of boys to blow the organ for his practising, after our rehearsals, when his regular blower could not come; and there was a good deal of competition amongst us for this little privilege; not so much because

of the pocket money we earned by the work, as for the rich sport it meant.

It was the easiest thing in the world to let the wind die out of the organ, simply for the pleasure of hearing the agonized voice from the other side call out: "Blow up, boys! blow up, please! I'll try not to use so much wind; but you won't let it out if you can help it, will you?" Now, wasn't that just asking for it?

One evening, while we were engaged in this pump-handle business, we discovered a loose board at the back of the organ; and, when we pulled it aside, there stood revealed a whole row of trackers leading to some pedal pipes. As we looked at these, we saw first one and then another fall and rise again. We soon noticed that they moved when the pedals were played, and it took but a moment to pull down one of them, to see what would happen. At once the pipe whose trigger we had touched spoke out clearly.

That was enough for us. O! the false pedal notes which marred that pupil's practices for weeks, before he smelt a rat! We got quite skilful in pulling the right note at the right time in certain of his exercises; so that he appeared to be making the same mistake over and over again. Sometimes we let him do it correctly, when we'd hear him say to himself: "Ah, that's right! I thought I ought to be able to do a simple scale like that properly. Just once more!"

And that once more became a dozen or twenty times more, before we withheld our assistance in the rear.

Of course the evening came when we overdid it, and were discovered. Then that student read us no end of a lecture, and had the loose board screwed up. But soon after, we thought out another plan for attaining the same end—to wit, the organizing of his practising for him.

While one of us kept the wind in the organ, the other crept into the vestry, opened the big harmonium which stood there, filled it with wind, and then pressed down the bottom half-dozen notes all together. The effect, with the organ playing at the same time, was as if one of the pedal notes had ciphered. So, at least, that pupil thought, for he would stop his playing, and run up and down the pedals repeatedly, to find which note was sticking. Then, as soon as he started playing once more, on would come the “cipher” as badly as ever.

Once we exasperated this diffident assistant to resort to extreme measures (!) over the pranks we were playing with the blowing. He hopped off the organ stool; rushed round to us at the back, furious in voice and appearance; and told us that, because of our atrocious behaviour that evening, we should receive not a penny; and that unless we blew properly for the next half-hour he would report the whole of the proceedings to the organist himself, and get us severely punished,

We knew quite well this threat of carpeting us meant nothing, but our conscience pricked us into giving the player that half-hour's decent blowing. By that time we had hatched a little plot of revenge for being docked our payment.

One of us kept the bellows full, while the other went in search of the big key of the vestry door, placing it ready in the lock outside. Then we silently turned off the gas at the meter (which was at the back of the organ), slipped out of the door ; locked it after us, and coolly departed !

How long it took the budding Handel to discover exactly what had happened, and to get out of the pitch-dark church, we never ascertained ; but I still doubt if he managed it much under half an hour. We knew the only other means of exit was through one of the west doors, in which a key was generally left. But that meant a journey afterwards to the old verger's, with the key ; so that he might have it to unlock that door for the early Service the next morning ; and such a nervous man as our under-tutor, for fear of burglars, would never have gone home that night without finding his way round to the vestry door, to remove the key we might have left on the outside there. Altogether, it must have been for him a night of nights.

There was another pupil of our organist at that time—a doctor, who was also a gentleman of the choir. He was quite a good pianist, but terribly nervous at the organ ; and he would never

pull out any loud stops while he was playing: it seemed almost to frighten him if he made anything like a big noise. At the same time, he loved his organ practice; though he hadn't yet got beyond the stage when he found it impossible to manage manuals, pedals, and stops all at the same time. We boys discovered this, when occasionally he presided over the accompanying of the Children's Service on Sunday afternoon.

Poor children! why are they so often left to the tender mercies of amateur catechists and organists, when extra care should be taken to give them the most experienced of both?

We weren't long before we found out another little limitation of our medical friend: he was hopeless at extemporizing; so that his accompaniment of the monotoned Creed, for instance, was not the easy and flowing performance of a practised hand. The choir-master had written out for him a series of simple chords, with the sentences of the Creed beneath them—one chord for each sentence.

No sooner had we made this discovery than we acted upon it. If we chose to quicken the recitation of the Creed, the worthy doctor was obliged to hurry his chords. Even a little speeding up in this direction used to make the beads of perspiration stand out on his forehead before he reached the end. But when we took it at a really smart pace, the fun grew fast and furious.

There was a speed limit, however, which it was impossible for our accompanist to exceed. So, when we boys passed this, he was left stranded ; because all his sentences and chords got hopelessly mixed up in the race, and he finished long after we had sung *Amen*. He daren't try to leave his MS. and play the *Amen* with us ; but he was obliged to wade through all the chords to the bitter end !

There remains fixed in my memory an occasion on which this gentleman played the Wedding March on the organ. Some friend of his was being married, and she particularly wished that march to be played by him ; though there was to be no other music at the Service. In a rash moment he consented, after which he was far too shy to back out of it.

One day, to my surprise, I received a request from the agitated medico that I would assist him on this auspicious occasion, by manipulating the organ stops, while he managed the playing. I was supposed to be a boy with some little idea of what the different stops meant. The wedding day, therefore, saw me in the organ chamber, full of importance, and determined to do my best to warrant my selection for the job.

Everything was ready to start on our murder of Mendelssohn, and the doctor was so worked up that he began too soon—while the wedding party were signing the registers in the vestry, instead of as they were leaving on the return

journey. But, having once begun, we both knew that he couldn't stop till he reached the end of the music.

When we were fairly under way, I pulled out one or two more stops, because there wasn't half enough noise to please me. At once came the nervous, hurried question: "Isn't that rather too loud?"

"No, Sir!" was my reply. "It's ripping! We could even do with a little more." And out came another stop.

"O! please!" came in agonized tones, "that's overwhelming!"

"Not a bit of it, Sir!" I answered, cheerily. "We can do heaps better yet: we've got ever so many more stops left." But they weren't left long: one by one I fetched them out, and we were at it full blast.

"Well done, Sir!" I shouted in the performer's ear. "That's grand!"

"It's awful!" he moaned. "I can't go on; I can't keep it up!"

"O yes, you can, Sir! Stick to it! The people in church are listening like anything," I said, by way of encouragement.

"But I'm getting near the end: have they come out of the vestry yet? What shall I do?" gasped the now desperate man.

"Why, start again, Sir," I answered, gaily. "I'll turn back for you." And I did. By Jove! He managed that transition beautifully! I shut

off a lot of steam at the right moment ; and we were going through the thing a second time.

Now I felt I had a chance of some really delicate work with the fancy stops, as we got to the softer bits in the middle of the March. There were two or three things, like the Piccolo, the Clarionet, and the Trumpet, I was dying to make a few little experiments with ; and I believe I managed some pretty smart manipulation in that direction. The combinations which resulted have probably never been heard on that organ since ; but the general effect was, to my mind at least, at the time, exactly appropriate to the occasion of a wedding—bright, stirring, and a little out of the ordinary.

Then we got on to the last lap, just in the nick of time, as the bride and bridegroom appeared again in the chancel. I managed to get my foot round to push down the Swell pedal, and then out came every stop that organ possessed !

It was a magnificent performance, though when it was over the organist was like the two blowers—a bit out of breath. Still, that didn't matter, because everyone—except the performer—was pleased and greatly impressed.

I believe that, at the wedding reception afterwards, the organist received almost as many congratulations as the happy pair. But to the day of his death that dear doctor never attempted the Wedding March again ; nor, strangely enough,

did he ever ask for any further assistance from me at the organ.

Organ stops and pipes ! Away goes my memory to the time when I was a deacon in my first curacy.

I've already told you of my introduction to the organist there, when the boys were heaving kneelers at him. Well ! It fell to my lot to take over that choir and do what I could with it. There was a bit of a struggle to begin with, but somehow we settled down to regular work, and I enjoyed the boys' practices immensely.

It so happened that the organ needed cleaning, and two men from the builders came down and set to work at it. I was keen enough to go and watch them as often as I could get a chance ; and it occurred to me, when I saw how they carefully arranged the pipes in different pews, so that those belonging to each separate stop had a seat to themselves, that the choir-boys might be interested in it all too.

That evening, therefore, after our rehearsal, I took the lads into the church, and showed them how the various pipes were constructed so as to produce fluty, or reedy, or other tones ; and how that the deeper the note the bigger was the pipe. I let them all blow down different pipes, to see how much more wind was needed for the larger ones. We spent a delightful half-hour together, and the youngsters went away full of it.

It was the next evening that I received such

a terrible shock. As I entered the vestry for the choir-practice, I wondered what could possibly be the matter in church. One peep out of the door, however, was enough to enlighten me.

Those boys had turned up extra early, and in full force, anticipating further experiments in the science of organ-building ; and, as luck would have it, the vestry door had been left unlocked after Evensong. In they trooped, and down into the church they descended. Every boy was anxious to find the biggest pipe he could blow, and the one which made the most noise. The whole place was turned upside down ; metal pipes were dented and bent ; and discarded ones were thrown into the wrong pews !

When I peered out of that vestry door, I beheld a sight which sent a shiver down my back. Marching round the church one behind the other, in a solemn procession, went those darling boys ; everyone holding an organ pipe in each hand, which he was blowing alternately for all he was worth !

There was a sudden stopping of the din when the leader turned the corner by the font and saw who was looking on, and a chastened group of boys crawled into the vestry, after depositing their pipes in the handiest seats on the way. We had a little heart-to-heart talk together, and I did my best to make the punishment fit the crime.

That was all well and good for the boys ; but think of my own position when I had got rid of

them, and went to survey the wreck in the church ! Who would be blamed for the whole thing ? Not, of course, the idiot who deserved it,— whoever it was who left that vestry door open— but the poor, unfortunate choir-master, who had only just got fairly started on his first job.

Was there anything I could do to save myself from utter disgrace with the powers that were, and from serious trouble with the organ builders ? That was the problem I stood there and tackled. In the end I went round and called on the chief of the two workmen engaged upon the cleaning, with half a sovereign for his privy purse ; and very late that night might have been discovered, leaving the church most mysteriously, two tired and dusty figures—one of them in parson's attire. It had taken longer than either of them anticipated to put things a little tidy again ; so that the work might go on the next morning as if nothing untoward had occurred.

Perhaps I oughtn't to have been surprised to see those youngsters marching round the church that night—boys, like all children, are ever fond of playing at what they work at when they are on duty.

Why, the very thought of this march of the organ pipes brings back the recollection of a summer evening when, as a choir-boy, I found myself, with three or four others, who were also there early, able to get into the vestry nearly an hour before our rehearsal began ; owing to the

fact that the verger had—as in the case I have just described—foolishly left the vestry door unlocked.

We were hunting around for something to occupy the time with, when an inspiration seized one of us. Why not have a solemn procession on our own? Agreed!

We put on our cassocks and surplices, and then dived into the priests' vestry, where we fished out red Oxford hoods, and white Cambridge ones, with stoles also of various shades, to wear as did the clergy.

Then we started round the church, one behind the other, with perfect solemnity, singing—from big hymn-books, belonging to the priests, as befitted the occasion—"Onward, Christian soldiers."

It was the delicious feeling that for one short half-hour, we were important Church Dignitaries, which made that a much-to-be-remembered night.

Off duty in the vestry! We boys in the old days spent more than one happy hour there, after working hard; not reckoning the nights we were up to some mischief in the place.

You wouldn't be likely with your first thoughts to associate the Lord Bishop with jolly times in the vestry; yet I have vivid recollections of the cheeriest half-hours there, with the bishop sitting on the table and us boys gathered round him, full of eager questions, and listening in dead silence to story after story, and all sorts of wise

and witty talk. He was one of those men whom boys draw to at once. We seemed to know instinctively that he understood us, and enjoyed our company.

I can see the good bishop now, with his sparkling eyes and his smiling face, leaning against that vestry table, Pastoral Staff in hand, explaining to us the meaning of the different symbols carved upon it, and telling us stories of the Saints under their tiny canopies.

How interested we were, for instance, to learn that one of the marks of St Nicolas was the sign of the three golden balls !

"Here they are, you see," said the bishop, "at the feet of St Nicolas. Have any of you ever seen three golden balls anywhere else ? "

We all guessed where he meant, but none of us liked to mention such a place as a pawnbroker's —always a mysterious resort to a small boy : a house of perhaps doubtful reputation, because of the quaint characters so often to be found furtively slipping in and out by the side door.

"Well ! " persisted his lordship, "where have you seen them ? "

One nipper ventured to whisper in an awed voice : "Outside the pawnshop, my lord."

"Yes, indeed ! " laughed the bishop, "outside the pawnshop ; because they say St Nicolas was the first pawnbroker : he was always trying to help the poor by giving or lending them money, when they were in need."

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Then he told us how the three golden balls became associated with this Saint.

You know the legend, of course: how that Nicolas, being a wealthy young man, and hearing that the father of three maidens in the city had become so poor that he was about to sell his daughters to a life of shame, because he had no money to provide a marriage dowry for them, crept secretly past his house one night, and threw in at the window a bag of gold. With this the father was able to marry honourably his eldest daughter.

Not long after, Nicolas stole by the house again, and threw in a second bag of gold, so that the second daughter might also marry well.

Then, once more, he went with a third bag; but that night the father was on the watch, and discovered who it was that had been so generous to him in his poverty.

Those three bags of gold were turned into three golden balls to serve as a sign for pawnbrokers, who chose Nicolas as their Patron Saint.

Another day, when our Service was done, the bishop came and sat with us round him; and we could see he was chuckling to himself over some delicious little tit-bit he had been saving up for us. We hadn't long to wait for his story.

"Last Sunday," said his reverence, "I was preaching some miles away, at the other end of the diocese. The church there is dedicated to St Mark, whose emblem you remember I was

telling you the last time I was here is the Lion ; and it was their Dedication Festival, so they had all kinds of beautiful decorations about.

“ Amongst the other things, there was a splendid new banner, which had just been given by the children of the Sunday Schools ; and it was hung on the pillar at the back of the pulpit. I had heard of this before I got to the church, so, as I went up the pulpit steps to preach, I was on the look-out for it.

“ It was indeed a gorgeous affair, most beautifully embroidered, with lots of heavy gold work about it. The design was a magnificent one of the Lion of St Mark, represented as ‘ rampant,’ like you see the lions on the Royal Standard—a really fine fellow.

“ But when I looked at the banner a second time, I don’t know how I kept from bursting with laughter ; for—would you believe it ?—the text they had chosen to put above and below that very ravenous-looking beast was : ‘ Suffer the little children to come unto me ’ ! ”

Still another story of that jolly bishop’s I remember from those old times, as he sat on the edge of the vestry table, while he told us choir-boys the yarn.

There was once in a pretty country village a highly respectable inn—the only one in the place—called “ The Cock.”

It happened that the landlord was smitten with the idea of emigration, so off he went across the

sea ; which meant that the Cock came under new management. A smart young man from a big town, who was full of push and go, took on the old house ; and he determined to make it more widely known and " classy " than before.

Soon after his advent, the new and enterprising host discovered that his inn was actually the property of the Lord Bishop of the Diocese ; because it stood upon ecclesiastical land, which had belonged to the Church from ancient days. What a pity, then, not to mark this unique fact in some striking fashion !

After a good deal of thought, the new innkeeper decided to change the name of the tavern, which thing he did ; having the sign swinging to and fro outside painted on both sides with the gorgeous figure of a Bishop in full canonicals, and the words in gold above : THE BISHOP'S INN.

Some years after, the young man's predecessor returned from abroad ; having made his pile, and anxious to retire and settle down. Imagine his surprise when he found the sign of his old house changed, and the place improved almost out of recognition !

So furious was the home-comer that he determined to bring the old name back again, by setting up another inn on the other side of the road, and calling it THE COCK. That move of his was a great success ; for travellers still associated the sign with that particular village,

and many of the country folk were pleased to find their old friend once more conducting his business as of yore.

The serious loss of custom which the opposition brought about across the way roused the ire of the younger landlord, who determined to get his own back, and to show publicly how he had been tricked.

The sign-painter had only recently renewed the brilliant and rather costly paintings of the worthy Bishop; and it seemed hardly worth while doing away with them, and putting the Cock back on its original signpost; so the artist was asked to paint in gold, on a piece of wood to be fastened below the picture of his Lordship, some additional words of explanation, which ran: THIS IS THE OLD COCK!

Dare I venture here to tell the story of another bishop I met some years after those choir-boy days, sitting on another table? I think perhaps I may, now that he has been dead for a long time. He was a well-known bishop, too, but I'm not thinking of mentioning his name.

How often I've wondered what the choir-boys—who were on either side of him on the occasion he described to me—would have thought, if only they had heard the conversation their bishop was holding with the junior curate, in the middle of the Service, under their very noses!

That was at the time I was reading for Orders with a friend, who on that particular afternoon

was starting off to conduct a Ten Days' Mission at a distance. I had gone to the station with him; and, having a few minutes to spare, we turned into the waiting-room on the platform, out of the bitterly cold wind.

To our surprise we found the only person there was the bishop, who was sitting on the table swinging his legs. He beamed on us as we entered, and held out his hand to my friend, whom he knew well. Then came my introduction to his lordship.

"So you're going to take Orders, are you?" asked the bishop in his rather commanding manner.

"I hope so, my lord," I replied, a bit nervously.

"Well, all I can say is, I trust you'll make a better job of it than the little curate man I've just left," said the reverend father, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'll try, my lord. But has the man you refer to done anything very dreadful?" I ventured to inquire, seeing my interest in him had been aroused.

"Done anything dreadful?" chuckled the bishop. "Certainly not! He's not done anything at all. That's the point. It's not what he's done, but what he isn't able to do that I'm talking of. Why the man can't even understand a joke."

"Now, what do you think of this?" went on the old gentleman. "I've been taking a Con-

firmation, and I asked this young curate to act as my chaplain, which meant that he stood by my side holding my Pastoral Staff, and cap and things.

"There was a wretched baby in the church, making a fearful noise, distressing everybody; so I was obliged to stop the Service and request the good mother to take out her squalling infant.

"While this removal was being effected I turned to the curate and asked him: 'Why is a child crying in church like a good resolution?' He just looked frightened to death, and said in a quivering voice, as if he were at a *viva voce* examination, floored by the first question: 'I really can't say, my lord.'

"Then I whispered to him: 'Because the best thing you can do with them both is to carry them out at once.' And—you'd hardly credit it—that man literally shook with terror: he hadn't the least idea, apparently, that I was only asking him a simple conundrum."

So my personal experience of bishops, you see, as a choir-boy and as a young man before Ordination, was that they could be delightfully human on occasion; and I was wonderfully reassured in my opinion that these great dignitaries were not always the awesome creatures they were so often represented to be, when I actually went up to the bishop's palace for my Deacon's examination, and discovered his lordship, in his shirt sleeves rowing a number of the cathedral

choristers round the ancient moat which still encircled his old feudal castle.

Already I have mentioned one or two nicknames that choir-boys have bestowed upon different people. I suppose it is mostly when they are off duty that the lads find time to give us these names; though as a rule it doesn't take them many moments to discover the word they need to describe us—it occurs in a flash to some active young mind; and once given it sticks to us for years, perhaps always.

Clergy come in for the biggest share of nicknames, doubtless because they lay themselves out so much to deserve them. Here are a few which choir-boys of my own acquaintance have given to parsons I know well; derived from their ordinary names, which, of course, I cannot mention without revealing their identity:—

The Blighter; The Rough Towel; The Beehive; Doughy; Cockie; Muggins; Smudgy; Billy Agony.

Here are some organists' nicknames, derived also from their own, by rules other than those contained in any ordinary English Grammar:—

The Bug; The Flea; The Bishop; Candlefat; Puddeny-pie; Heave ho!

More interesting are the nicknames given by the choir-boys to different people because of something distinctive about their persons or their manners. The following occur to me as belonging to various friends of my own in different places.

We are so utterly unconscious of anything of the kind attaching to us, that I doubt very much whether any one of these most estimable gentlemen will recognize himself under either of the pet names given here; even if he happens to have had patience enough to read so far as this particular page.

The Silkworm is, perhaps, the gentlest of all the nicknames I have heard. It was given to one of the dearest old priests, because of his long, white, silky hair; and it described so well his soft, delightful bearing also.

The Undertaker was a retired bishop, who lived for a while in our parish, and occasionally helped at the church. He was lugubrious and doleful enough to have merited the name for that alone, but he actually got it because the first sermon he treated us to was preached from the text—which he gave out in a mournful voice—"Under-take for me." (Isaiah xxxviii. 14.)

Had Some also got his nickname through his first sermon in our church. He was a bulky person, and had every outward appearance of doing himself decidedly well. There was something so distinctly appropriate about that first text of his—"I have enough." (Genesis xxxiii. 9 and 11.)

Lollipop was even a third name derived from a sermon, in a peculiarly round-about way. How well I remember that man and that sermon! To this day I wonder how it was that neither the

boys nor myself went off in an explosion when the text was announced. The poor man stammered, and he began in this way: "My text is taken from the ninth verse of the second chapter of St Paul's Epistle to the Col-lol-lol-lol-lossians." Do you catch the connection between that and his nickname?

The Stepfather had neither children nor step-children. The boys gave him that name on account of his curious walk. He went along very slowly, and just before he planted each foot where you thought he was going to place it, he moved it on a little farther in a most tantalising way.

Archdeacon Fireworks so exactly hit off the little man who earned this title that you often caught yourself smiling as you watched him when he was fully wound up, and then thought of this nickname of his. Short, fussy, all over the place at once, talking rapidly, gesticulating wildly—it was a great display of fireworks; and *Archdeacon* matched his show of importance to a T.

The Busy Bee was the most casual, lackadaisical, lazy of men, whose name began with a B.

Bunny received his nickname because of his prominent front teeth.

The Iceberg—that was a particularly clever description of a profoundly learned and extremely devout man, who drew large congregations to hear his wonderful sermons. Yet he was unapproachable, and kept everyone, especially choir-boys,

at a great distance. But what a big heart there really was behind that grim and forbidding exterior !

The Postscript won this name simply by having P.S. for his initials.

The Golliwog, as you would naturally guess, was the name belonging to a little parson with a head of hair thick and fuzzy, which allowed of no parting, and stuck out in all directions like a mop.

The Sardine, on the contrary, was a man who took particular care to treat his long black locks to plentiful supplies of pomatum. Like his namesakes in the tins, he seemed to live in oil.

The Mighty Atom was the tiniest and swankiest priest I have ever seen. I expect he got that nickname wherever he went ; you would almost have apologized if you had referred to him as anything else.

The Flamingo was a Verger—not the regular man at that church, but a “dug-out” taken on for the duration of the Great War. His eyes were funny ; they were drawn down so that they showed two red strips at the bottom—hence his name.

The Cockatoo was the nickname given to a Sidesman whose head in profile—especially about the nose—looked so like that of a parrot that you smiled at the likeness when you caught sight of him that way.

Off duty, and away in the country for a ramble,

I found myself one Saturday with a choir-boy chum. The autumn afternoon was drawing in as we were passing a charming little village church.

Often we had been that way before, but always the church was locked. This time, however, we saw through the stained-glass windows the glimmer of a light within, which seemed to suggest that it might be worth while trying the door again. We did so, quite quietly, in case some Service were proceeding; and sure enough there was something going on; so we slipped in and stood silently on the mat.

All was dark in the building, except at the lectern, where two candles were lighted, and we could just distinguish a young parson standing. Then, as we looked, he announced in a nervous tone, which was meant to be loud and dramatic: "Here beginneth the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews"; and to our amazement he added in the same voice: "Is that better, darling?"

We gathered that there must be some lady-love back in the tower, conducting a sort of rehearsal before the morrow; so we judged it kinder to beat a hasty retreat, and leave them to it.

It was in a little country church, unique for more than one treasure of art, that I once had an interview with a choir-boy off duty, which was so quaintly humorous that it is worth recording.

I was on a holiday visit to this delightful village,

and looked in at the church the first time I walked through the place. There I found a choir-boy finishing some work with the music in the stalls. As he passed me on his way out, I ventured to remark on the beauty of the frescoes, both ancient and modern, with which the walls were everywhere covered ; and the lad was keen on giving me an explanation of them.

There is no need to repeat all this chorister told me, but his account of the oldest and most renowned of the pictures ought certainly to be put down in black and white ; though to appreciate fully what he actually said, you should first know what he ought to have said. I did not learn the truth which lay behind the startling description he gave till a few days later, when the squire himself showed me all that was so fascinating in the church he loved and had restored and beautified so splendidly.

During the restoration certain wall-paintings were discovered, which were treated with the greatest care, to preserve them from any damage by exposure to the atmosphere after so long a time.

The most remarkable of these ancient frescoes was one of considerable size, representing St Christopher bearing the Holy Child across the stream. What was unique about this was that in the wavelets of the river, where the saint was treading, the artist had introduced the tiny figure of a mermaid. Only one other example of this

had been discovered, and archæologists were not agreed as to its meaning; probably it had some mystic reference to the perils of the waters—the temptations of the deep.

Evidently at some time, this interesting explanation of the picture had been overheard by the lad who first introduced it to my notice, but in the transmission of the narrative through him, part of the truth had gone sadly astray; for his words to me were:—

“ This picture, Sir, is the oldest and most famous one in the church: it represents the story of St Christopher and the *barmaid*.”

Sometimes you find the tables neatly turned, and the position of the choir-boys and yourself nicely reversed.

In the ordinary way you expect your boys to be silent and grave, attentive and solemn throughout a long Service, when there may be either much that bores them to distraction, or some little happening that tickles them to mirth. And you're down on them for the least smile, or whisper, or attempt to enliven the dull proceedings.

What if the boys are expecting you yourself to be serious and even reverent, when everything is tending to make you rock with laughter; though you know quite well that the least giving way to the well-nigh overmastering temptation will be taken by them, as they watch you intently, to be the greatest lack of appreciation, and evidence almost of irreligion?

During the week before the second Christmas of the Great War, I was spending the night with my churchwarden, who lived at the far end of a very large parish, near one of the district churches some miles away; and with the coffee that finished our quiet little dinner came a mysterious tap at the folding doors leading out to the lawn. My host rose to discover the reason, and, as he opened the door, from the darkness without came a polite request that the choir-boys might be allowed to enter and sing Carols.

Permission was given, but I could never hope properly to describe the small regiment that marched solemnly in and formed up at the other end of the room.

That distant corner of the parish was deep in the country, where old customs had lingered long. Christmas-time never came but the "Mummers" went forth with their weird performance, as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them. But this year none were left to go out—all had been called to the War; and there remained only the chest of "properties" which lived in the home of one of the bigger choir-boys.

Behold those dozen country lads, then, as serious as magistrates upon the bench, but arrayed in such a medley of uniforms from the property box as would have turned any London stage-manager green with envy! Trouser legs and coat sleeves were turned up where they were

too long, and "stuffing" was introduced where garments else would have hung too loosely. There were Navy and Army officers of ancient days, and a policeman of a hundred years ago, a white-sheeted ghost, and a countryman in a smock frock, a modern Scout, a C.L.B. boy, and others whom I cannot now recall. To add to the novelty of the production, for some unknown reason all the lads had blackened their faces, like Christy Minstrels; except the Ghost, who seemed to have dipped his head in a flour barrel, and then to have stuck on an old black silk hat.

The oddest part of the whole thing was that these make-ups should have been considered by the youngsters as appropriate for the singing of Carols in. But they were one and all obviously in dead earnest about it; for they produced a Carol-book each, and sang, not at all badly, four or five of the best-known ones, from beginning to end.

How we sat through the performance I expect we shall neither of us ever know. I've had to do a few tough things in my time, but nothing will ever prove harder than it was that evening to keep a straight face. My lips were sore for days, where I had bitten them till they bled.

It was the mixture of the ridiculous get-up and the sober Carols that was so upsetting; especially as you had to sit still and gaze at it all for well over a quarter of an hour, with faces

such as a vicar and his churchwarden might be expected by their own choir-boys to wear on the occasion of the performance of sacred music direct from the very church itself.

At the end of twenty minutes' agony my warden made a pretty speech; then I added my blessing and half a crown, which my friend doubled. We considered it distinctly cheap at the price to get rid of those terrible nippers; and, as soon as their backs were turned, we laughed till our sides ached again.

That boy dressed as a ghost pressed a memory button, and took me back many years, to a favourite form of torture we used to prepare for novices in the choir.

The grand old church stood in an ample churchyard where there were monuments and headstones of every description, many of them huge things surrounded by tall, cumbersome railings. No one had been buried there for generations before any of us came upon the scene, and all these uninteresting memorials were of the age when the Cross—the simple emblem of our Christian Faith and Hope of a Life Beyond—was the one thing which was not allowed to stand over a Christian grave.¹

If you had looked into that particular burying ground, you would have seen in the flat slabs of

¹ I am reminded here of a passage in one of the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield's fascinating archæological books, in which he refers to this very churchyard, and, speaking of the "fulsome

stone, and huge blocks of masonry, with massive iron bars protecting them, absolutely nothing to suggest that it was holy ground : no sacred symbol to stamp it as God's Acre. So please be lenient with the choir-boys who sometimes fell into the temptation of treating it as a playground. Indeed, whether you grant them your indulgence or not, they did so use it ; and I am writing now, not to justify their actions but to record them.

All that churchyard, of course, was out of bounds to us ; except the winding gravel pathway, leading from the gate to the vestry, which was conveniently hidden away at the back of the church.

Yet, if those gravestones could only speak, what stories they would have to tell of youthful escapades ! Sometimes those monuments were Scotch hills, from behind which we stalked swift-running deer ; at other times they were Indian mountains or African jungles, through which we hunted big and dangerous game. They were caves where lurked desperate brigands ; medieval castles, whence knights went forth to engage their neighbours in mortal combat ; or palisades,

epitaphs that delighted our forefathers and attributed to the deceased every virtue that the ingenious scribe could devise," he says :—

" In contrast with these effusions the simple screed on a tombstone in St ———'s Churchyard may be quoted :—

He was ———

But words are wanting to say what ;
Say what is just and kind,
And he was that."

sheltering North American Indians of opposing tribes. Rocks they were, behind which cut-throat pirates lay in hiding; forest trees, harbouring the merry men of Robin Hood, or the bad followers of bold Turpin; arctic ice peaks, where the seals and polar bears were trapped; or ruined castles, about which stole awesome ghosts and goblins late at night.

For all new-comers there was an elaborate system of initiation into the mysteries of these various pastimes; but the trial of pluck we loved most to subject freshers to was that which seemed most naturally to fit the gruesome place—the test of being proof against the fear of ghosts.

Into the darkest corners of the churchyard, on the blackest night, some unoffending youngster would be dragged; there to hear whisperings, groanings and sepulchral sounds, apparently from the depths of ancient tombs. On another night he would first be blindfolded, with his hands tied tight behind; then conducted in oppressive silence to the most distant part of the place, and there left alone to find his way out to safety as best he might. As a final test of courage in the face of supernatural visitation, after having been duly fed with dreadful stories of the sad fate of those who had quailed in the presence of spirits walking amidst those very graves, he would be taken to the spot where all was most uncanny and dark; to behold an apparition in white, rising and falling, approaching and disappearing,

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sighing and moaning, such as might have unnerved the strongest.

The kid who could stand this threefold ordeal without fainting, blubbing, or squealing was reckoned to be up to standard and fully fledged.

A close observer would have noticed as a curious coincidence that almost invariably on the day after the final test of the initiatory rite had been applied, some boy would get into trouble for mysterious marks of dirt upon his clean, white surplice, which he could not in any way account for, but which probably the ghost of the night before might have been able to throw some light upon, if only he had been asked.

Another recollection of that churchyard is of an evening in the early autumn, when some spirit of evil put it into the minds of two coalmen to depart that day, after shooting some tons of coke into the stokehole beneath the vestry, and leave behind them, in a neatly piled up heap at the top of the cellar steps, the black bags which had contained their wares.

Was ever more alluring temptation placed directly in the path of unsuspecting choir-boys?

Before our rehearsal that evening we had only time to note the fact that those sacks were there; but during the practice many inventive brains were struggling with the problem of how best to deal with them as soon as work was over, and the assistant organist had seen us safely off the premises.

While we were divesting ourselves of our cassocks, a whispered word went round that a council of war would be held at the first possible moment, in a little side street which had known the hatching of many previous plots.

Our silent and exemplary departure that evening, coupled with the almost affectionate farewell we gave that choir-master, after we had watched with quiet and unusual interest his careful locking of the churchyard gates, ought to have suggested to him some tiny thought of suspicion ; but, you see, he was not the chief—only a younger pupil, and he'd many little things to learn, which it fell to our lot to teach him. Besides, those coal sacks were there plain enough for him as well as for us to see, and if he failed to be as smart as we were in noticing them, so as to nip any mischievous development in the bud, I ask : whose fault was it if things went wrong ? Could he certainly expect any of us to say to him : “ Please, Sir, some foolish men have given us a grand opportunity of a good hour's enjoyment this evening ; do you think we shall be justified in availing ourselves of it ? ”

But, be that as it may, we adjourned to the retired spot, as arranged, and the matter before the meeting was debated with great thoroughness, many members present speaking at the same time. I have some hazy notion that it was a proposal of my own which carried the day ; at any rate we all issued in silence from our retreat, and

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entered once more, by a secret method, into the churchyard which had been so securely barred against us.

Those of us who were nimble at climbing swarmed up into a magnificent old horse-chestnut tree, which stood in the middle of the enclosure, while the others acted as bearers, and brought to its foot some twenty or more of those big black bags. These were passed up to the young monkeys above, who mounted with them to the topmost and outermost branches, and hung them there "till called for." The rest of the sacks were displayed in the same way on another tree, after which the little band of desperados melted away in the darkness, and only the birds who spent the night in those trees knew anything about their strange evening visitors.

Naturally the matter didn't end there, because the man who called for the empties the next day had to return for the office boy to climb up and secure them, which process occupied the best part of the morning, I believe. However, I needn't trouble you with the sequel: it is not altogether the happiest of memories, though I must confess that the adventure was well worth its consequences.

Writing of these choristers' games within the church precincts reminds me of an interesting note made by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, in his book *The Village Church*, where he says:—

"Sometimes we find odd curiosities on the exterior walls of churches. As the local archers

made bows of the branches of yew-trees growing in churchyards, so they sharpened their arrows on the stones of the tower, and have left the mark behind them. A coloured red line on the north wall of Llansilin Church is a relic of the time when the game of 'fives' was played in the churchyard just as the nine holes on the stone benches of the cloisters of some of our cathedrals tell of the 'Nine Men's Morris' which the choir-boys played when they were not busy with their studies."

A favourite "off duty" haunt of those days was a very second-rate tuck shop, not far from the church; where cheap sweets, ginger-beer and such-like refreshments could be, and were pretty often obtained by the choir-boys.

We knew the proprietor of this establishment affectionately as "Jobby," because his first name, according to the legend over his place of business, was Job. His temper was as short as his name, and nothing delighted us more than to apply the match which so easily set it alight.

During the winter months old Jobby had on sale great balls of a hot concoction, for all the world like the stuffing put in ducks when they are cooked, and which went by the name of faggots. These were displayed in a great tin on his counter, all floating in warm gravy.

Customers brought basins, and gallipots, and things, to carry home these delicacies; otherwise there was only newspaper to wrap them in, which was not ideal for the liquid part,

One evening two or three of us were inspecting the none-too-clean boxes of sweets, through the little window panes, when we espied on the counter a tabby kitten, busily engaged in toilet operations, near by a half-empty tin of faggots.

In a moment our heads were together, and a plan of action was agreed and acted upon without undue delay; for everything depended on seeing it through before any customer appeared.

Not a little skill was required to get the shop door open without ringing the bell attached to it, but a certain amount of practice on former occasions had made some of us adepts at this; and on the night in question we managed successfully. Then the leader quietly lifted the kitten by the scruff of the neck, and *sat it in the gravy in the tin.*

As quietly as we had entered we retired, and through the window watched once more that bowl of faggots. The astonished kitten crept gingerly out of the nourishing liquid, leaving a trail of grease behind her as she walked across the counter. On into the window she advanced, shaking her hind legs alternately right and left, after the manner of cats; till she had sprinkled well the frowsy sweets with spots of luscious gravy.

The last we saw of the kit that evening was sitting hard by the brandy-balls and stick-jaw in the corner, licking herself once more—this time no doubt with an added relish.

We moved on then, because someone had just

arrived to make a purchase ; and we guessed the wind would be up as soon as Jobby came on the scene to do the serving.

Perhaps it is as well that boys worry very little about what they eat. Life would not be worth living in early youth if you ate only what you knew you ought to.

I remember my own child's remarking one day, when a new dish appeared at lunch : " Don't say it will do me good if I eat this, daddy, will you ? Those things are always horrid."

Certainly it was a good thing for old Jobby in the days of long ago that some of us were not over-particular about the age or quality of the sweet-stuffs he had to offer.

The time of a choir excursion is a good one to study the variety and originality of the food the boys will bring with them, when they set out for a day's trip, and are expected to provide their own lunch. This is generally produced and devoured very soon after the train starts ; so there is less to carry when they reach the sea, and a bigger appetite for tea.

Yet boys are not the only people who take queer things with them to eat on such occasions. A colleague of mine told me (as we were journeying together with our choir-boys for an outing, and were amused at the menu that one carriage displayed) that the " mothers " from a poor midland district he was once working in took the quaintest things he had ever seen,

Every conceivable viand those mothers provided themselves with, but the old party who would undoubtedly have gained a prize for resourcefulness was the one who took with her *a little cold Irish stew in a sponge-bag!*

The very boys we were taking that day to the seaside, as soon as they reached the shops near the beach, watched with envy some of the men of the choir enter an oyster saloon and prepare for a feast.

I overheard two of the youngsters talking eagerly together outside.

“What are oysters like, Fred? Have you ever tasted them?”

“No, I haven’t, but I should like to; they must be A.I. Shall we have some?”

“Rather! How much can you spend on them? I’ll give a ha’penny if you will! Let’s get a pen’orth!”

So in went Fred with his wholesale order, only to come out of the shop with a long face, and a report that you could buy no more than one for a penny.

However, that didn’t deter the lads, who were more than ever determined to pull off their first oyster lunch. They entered the saloon, and (as I afterwards heard from one of the choir-men inside) bargained with the proprietor to give them half an oyster each for their joint penny. A good-sized native was therefore cut in two, and the shell passed to the bigger boy, for him to have first bite,

Alas ! Before he was aware of it, the whole oyster had slipped down ! Then the pair of reckless feasters went outside and argued long and loudly about the return of that other half-penny.

A small but enterprising choir-boy I once knew discovered a novel use for a fairly common article of food. I was calling one day to inquire after this little chap ; for he was at home with some childish ailment. I found I had unfortunately timed my visit for washing day. However, I was pleased to learn from his mother that the lad, after a couple of days indoors, was practically all right again.

“ He’s been most useful to me at home to-day, Sir,” said the good lady, “ minding the baby like any girl. You’ll find them both in the front parlour now, Sir, if you’d like to look in at them.”

Sure enough I did find them both in there ; but, O ! the sight that poor baby presented !

The boy himself was happy and comfortable enough, in an easy chair by the side of the fire, devouring some “ penny dreadful ”—a thing he was passionately fond of. But the infant ! Well, the infant was happy too, I suppose, after a fashion.

That inventive genius of a choir-boy, in order to keep the child quiet, so that it didn’t disturb his reading, had smeared its tiny hands with treacle, and then pulled a handful of feathers out of a pillow, putting them in a heap on the little semi-circular table of the high chair !

Can you picture what happened ? Hands, arms, face, dress and chair were all covered with feathers, which the baby was still busily engaged in picking off one spot, only to find them sticking on another !

I left the house before that fond mother came in and discovered the mess. It was the last time she desired her hopeful son, whether ill or well, to stay at home and help on washing day "like any girl."

Often, during recreation hours, choir-boys can be made most useful ; while they find abundance of enjoyment for themselves out of the help they are giving to some good cause.

In my own youthful days a favourite class of entertainment was "Mrs Jarley's Waxworks." Never did we spend jollier times than at those rehearsals and performances. After some little practice, we became adepts at that style of thing ; so that for more than one winter we were in great demand as money-raisers at Church Bazaars and entertainments ; while we gave pleasure and amusement also to the sick folk at the big County Hospital, which happened to be in our parish.

These exhibitions were arranged in a series of scenes, each of which portrayed three or four famous characters in history, story, or what not, represented by supposed waxwork figures. Every figure or group was set on a low pedestal, which presumably contained the clockwork by which the stiff, mechanical movements were produced,

"Mrs Jarley" was the show-lady, who explained the characters in minute detail; and she was assisted by a lively page-boy, John, who dusted the dummies, and wound them up when their jerky actions were to begin.

Then, for a grand *finale*, all the figures were grouped together on the stage—a really imposing and artistic array, with attractive and effective costumes and properties of every description.

You may guess how all this appealed to us nippers; and, though we had endless fun behind the scenes, and perhaps worried to grey hair more than one dear lady who set out to help in our training; yet we tried to be sporting enough never to spoil any performance itself with our pranks.

Those good people who managed (!) us gradually learnt wisdom in the art; but at the beginning they bought their experience in rather a costly market.

For instance, a scene in the very first show we ever gave represented famous advertisements, two of which I remember vividly still. One displayed an old nurse dosing a baby with "Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup," and an actual bottle of the stuff was procured, with the object of making the thing more realistic; though how on earth the audience was to detect from a distance that that small bottle contained the genuine article I never quite understood.

As a matter of fact the phial did not contain soothing syrup, nor anything else, on the night of the performance; for we boys very quickly

had the cork out, to see what the medicine was like.

My ! how we smacked our lips at the first taste of that delicious aniseed-flavoured mixture ! Two of us finished it off in no time, though the sweet lady who had thus wasted half a crown on two such reprobates, was genuinely concerned lest we might suddenly fall down and writhe in mortal agony, after such an overdose of what, by the printed directions, ought to have been taken only in drops.

A second character in that same scene was the Nabob of Pickle fame. He sat turbaned and cross-legged on his pedestal, with a huge earthenware jar in his lap, and a long fork, which, when the machinery was wound up, he moved in three jerks from the jar to his capacious mouth.

To represent a pickle, one lady suggested that a green-gage from a box of preserved fruit might be stuck on the fork ; for which purpose she bought an enormous box of these dessert dainties. Needless to say they every one disappeared in the twinkling of an eye, the moment that box was discovered ; and for Nabob there was in the end prepared a piece of cork, shaped and coloured like a pickled walnut.

Now who in his sober senses would have provided such things, and let them loose amongst twenty average choir-boys ? Still, as I have already said, those ladies gained wisdom by experience, and at a price,

Amongst the boys at that time there was one who was detested by all the choir: he was a horribly bad-tempered youth, and a bully into the bargain. During one of those waxwork exhibitions some of us, who had suffered at his hands, found a novel way of getting a little of our own back.

This boy's place in the scene where he appeared was at the back of the stage; and we discovered a small hole in the curtain immediately behind him. That was enough!

When the front curtain went up and revealed the wonderful models, we silently passed a walking-stick through that hole at the rear; till it caught our tyrant well in the middle of his back, as he sat there in full view of the audience, unable even to wink an eyelid, without ruining his reputation as the smartest performer of the lot. He couldn't tell in the least who it might be that was tormenting him; so we rubbed it in—or rather, we poked it in—with no gentle hand.

Through the curtain we could catch the murmur of awful threats of what would happen when he got hold of us afterwards, growled under the breath of the savage yet helpless bully; and for each of these he got an extra dig.

When the scene was over, the victim came off the stage in a towering passion, with the perspiration dripping from his chin; but, though he tried to raise the wind, nobody could discover who the culprits were. Besides, he was so gener-

ally disliked that even those in command took little trouble to find out who had been his assailants.

So successful did these entertainments become that the organizers were bold enough to launch out into engaging the Town Hall for a series of grand performances, which I believe helped largely the building fund of a district church then in course of erection in the parish.

At these really swagger affairs it was felt that the meek little person who had taken the part of "Mrs Jarley," might be replaced by a certain Major, well known throughout the county for his great interest and success in the management of amateur theatricals.

So, under the direction of this military gentleman we were forthwith placed. What a splendid manager he made; and with what awe we boys obeyed even his very nod!

As our rehearsals for those special performances neared the end a brilliant idea seized the Major. We were choir-boys, rather renowned for our singing; so why not let us appear as singing waxworks?

No sooner thought of than acted upon: we were put through our paces at once.

It was at the end of the last scene, when we were all grouped together in a great array, that we were to do this wonderful singing; and I can hear the Major now, declaiming the words of introduction to this final triumph of his invention:—

“Ladies and gentlemen ; at stupendous cost, and with the aid of every device of art and science ; after the untold labour of many years, I have at last succeeded in the realization of the dream of my life—the production of waxwork figures which not only move with lifelike gesture, as I trust I have given abundant proof to you this evening, but which also imitate to perfection the human voice in its most wonderful gift of singing.

“Here again I shall hope to prove that I make no empty claim ; for when with my wand I touch an invisible spring upon the stage, the figures before you will burst forth into wild and beautiful music.”

Then the exhibitor banged on the floor with the butt end of the long billiard cue he had been using as a pointer throughout the performance—a signal to us to start our novel singing. At that moment each boy had to shout at the top of his voice any verse of any song in any key he liked !

The result was truly appalling, and at our first trial of it in rehearsal we nearly all tumbled off our stands with laughter. But when we had repeated it a few times, and had grown accustomed to the hideous and confused noise we made, we found we could manage it without even a smile.

At a second thump on the ground we all instantly stopped our singing (!), till with the third bang, we

began more reasonably the first verse of the National Anthem, at the close of which the curtain fell on the whole performance.

The idea was decidedly smart, and it worked splendidly—till the very last evening, when the awful thing happened.

The scene which followed the mishap, both before and behind the curtain, just badgers description.

The Major was in grand form that night : not a little flushed and excited over the undoubted success of his management. He made his final speech with tremendous oratorical display : the words rang out clearly to the farthest corner of the crowded hall—"When with my wand I touch an invisible spring upon the stage——."

Down came the heavy cue with terrific force, in a sort of wild abandon—not on that "invisible spring upon the stage" at all, but *on the gallant Major's very tenderest corn!*

One word alone—a word which I must confess adequately fitted the situation—fell from the Officer's lips, clear and distinct, upon the ears of the astounded audience and performers, to say nothing of the benevolent ladies behind the scenes.

What that word was there is no need for me to mention here—you have already guessed it; but the moment it was uttered everything was thrown into dire confusion.

The Major himself leapt farther into the air

than I'll warrant he'd done for many a long day ; while the waxwork figures toppled off their perches in helpless glee ; and, as the curtain descended the audience was just holding on to its sides and rocking with laughter.

With changing times came a change also in the style of entertainment which the public favoured and choir-boys were in request for. Waxworks died a natural death, and children's plays and tableaux came very much to the fore.

Two brothers—sons of a parson—I remember so well, who were particularly good actors, each in his distinctive way.

Ted, though stiff in his actions, was careful and particular about being word-perfect in every part he was playing ; and he ground away at his study of the lines, till he could give the correct emphasis to a nicety in every single sentence.

Peter, on the other hand, was a born actor, and played with a smoothness and ease that was charming. He dominated the stage whenever he appeared on it ; but his lines—well, you never could get him to learn them properly. Yet, somehow it always seemed to go all right on the night of the performance. Peter just carried the whole thing through.

One evening we had arranged a grand entertainment for the school children and their parents at the Christmas Prize-giving, and the renowned brothers had two important parts in the play we produced.

Never was there such an appreciative audience ; never was Peter in better form ; and never was Ted more touchy over having to act with his younger brother, who had " rotted away the time he ought to have spent stewing over the words ; so that he knew no more what he had to say than an old Tom cat," as he put it picturesquely to the stage manager just before the rise of the curtain.

The first scene sailed along smoothly, with Ted, as the hero, making love quite correctly to the beautiful heroine. Then Peter appeared, as a sort of page-boy—a character study entirely after his own heart, and the audience woke up to real enjoyment.

Alas, poor Peter ! The applause which greeted his entry drove completely out of his head the few opening sentences of his part he had managed to learn, so he started gagging, with excruciatingly funny by-play, which drew all the interest away to himself, and delighted the youthful onlookers beyond measure, but left Ted stranded, and speechless with rage.

This was the sort of dialogue that ensued :—

" Why the Dickens don't you say the proper words, you cuckoo ? "

" Cuckoo yourself ! You get on with your own part, and I'll fit in mine all right ! "

" What on earth do you mean, you young idiot ? " (advancing towards Peter in a threatening attitude).

" How can I pick up any cues with you jolly-well fooling about like this ? "

" All right, old cockalorum ; keep your hair on ! How do you think I can remember my part with you chasing me round the table ? Get over by the fireplace and start again ! "

" Start again ? Can't you see you're spoiling the whole show, you blockhead ? " (making another dash at Peter, who skilfully placed a chair in the way for him to fall over, which he promptly did).

" Now who's the blockhead, Humpty Dumpty ? Couldn't you see a great bit of furniture like that without tumbling over it ? You're turning the whole blessed show into an acrobatic performance ; and not an over good one at that, eh ? "

Shouts went up from every part of the audience, as Ted scrambled up in a perfect fury, and made for Peter in dead earnest.

Then the fun grew fast and furious as the chase waxed hot. Under the table and over it ; round the chairs and across the sofa the affectionate brothers darted.

Nimble Peter knew well how to look after himself. and he found time to stop every now and then to put up his thumb to his nose and open his hand at Ted, on the opposite side of the table or the couch. Once he managed to drag the cloth off, and throw it over his brother's head as he came out from underneath the table.

Cushions, hassocks, and chairs flew in all directions, and the audience cheered lustily at the wild horseplay.

Finally Ted managed to seize Peter by one of his shoulders, but overbalanced in doing so; and the pair went rolling into the artificial grate, amidst an awful clatter of fireirons and mantelpiece ornaments.

Then the curtain came down, as it would have done at the beginning of the squabble, if the stage-manager and his assistant behind the scenes hadn't been doubled up with laughter.

To this day I believe the bulk of those present imagined that the whole thing was part of the performance as originally planned.

One more story must suffice to finish this chapter. I include the incident here because it began in the house of a choir-boy, when both he and I were "off duty," and it ended before we actually went on duty again the same evening.

I had just been appointed Precentor at a church in a big seaport town, but not being altogether satisfied with my chambers, I agreed with a proposal of the verger to occupy rooms with him and his family, if he moved into a larger house. This he did, and I was more than comfortable with him till I set up a home of my own.

It was but a few days after we got into our new abode that the adventure occurred which I am about to relate.

At the church we had a daily Choral Evensong at 7.30, so that dinner was fixed at 6.30.

On the night in question I was just finishing my meal, when I was startled by loud screams

from the region of the kitchen. Rushing to my door, I called out to inquire if the verger were murdering his wife and children.

"No, Sir!" came the reply, "I'm not killing anybody; but if you will be kind enough to come out here you will see what has happened."

I needed no second invitation, and was rewarded with one of the funniest scenes I have ever set eyes on, outside a Cinema theatre.

The verger, who had been a cabinetmaker in earlier days, and was a handy-man about the house, as well as in the church, was putting his kitchen straight by hanging the pictures that evening, with the united aid of his wife, choir-boy son, and little daughter. Only a few minutes before he had driven into the wall a big nail, but finding that it went in so easily, he felt it would not be secure enough to hang a heavy weight upon; so he pulled it out again, to get a firmer hold for it, when, to everyone's consternation, it was discovered that he had hammered it into a lead water-pipe!

All the family were drenched with the fountain of water which poured over them, blowing the plaster from the wall on its way; and while the wife and daughter were screaming, the harassed father and excited son were trying to divert the stream with a duster held over the hole.

The worst of it was, as the verger explained, that, being new to the house, he didn't know

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where the main tap was, to turn off the water at. Besides, he was due to start for his duties at the church.

I had to go, too, to sing Evensong ; but I saw that it was impossible for the good man to leave his wife to cope with their private little water flood alone ; so I offered to attend to whatever was necessary at the church for him, and asked what he was responsible for there.

“ I have to turn on the electric lights at the special cupboard near the church door, Sir, and then to ring the bell and blow the organ,” he said.

I set off with the bunch of keys containing the one for the electric-light cupboard, meaning to attend to this myself, and to find a choir-boy to manage the bell and the organ.

As I was leaving the house, I heard the verger calling after me : “ One moment, Sir, please ! I have just remembered Smith, who was verger before me ; he is always willing to take my duty, if I wish to be free any evening ; and he lives only in the next road. Sammy (the little choir-boy son) shall run round at once and explain things to him : I know he'll be quite ready to help, and very likely he'll be at the church as soon as you are yourself, Sir.”

After that brilliant suggestion, Sammy and I started off together, he one way and I another.

Arrived at the church I struck a match and unlocked the cupboard door near the entrance,

to find myself faced with a great array of small electric switches, in neat rows, and three or four bigger ones underneath. But there was not a single direction as to what any one of them controlled.

I could merely make a blind selection, and pull half a dozen odd switches in different places. The result was hardly encouraging; for lights began to appear in all sorts of out-of-the-way corners, where they wouldn't be needed, while the middle of the church, where the people were to sit, was left still in semi-darkness,.

More guesses only meant more lights appearing anywhere but where they were wanted; so in desperation I pulled one of the big handles below. The church was a blaze of light in a moment: every little bulb glowed its brightest!

That would never do: such wanton waste of electricity would be visited almost with imprisonment, if the churchwardens discovered that we had sung Evensong that night under such conditions.

Off went that switch again, and down came the next big one. Ugh! The church was in utter darkness, which also would never do.

Just as I had returned to my first mixed-up selection of odd lights, the door by my side opened, and a friend in need appeared. Thank goodness, here was Smith, the old verger! I rushed at him; thrust the keys into his hand, and said: "How glad I am you've come! Put the lights right as quickly as you can!"

"What lights?" asked the man, in a provoking manner, staring at the keys as if he were afraid they would bite him.

"Why these lights in the church," I answered sharply. "Look at them! They are all over the place, and everywhere except where they ought to be."

"But I'm afraid I don't understand them," said my useless-looking helper, dangling and jingling the bunch of keys, like a rattle.

"Then what on earth is the good of your coming, if you don't know what to do when you get here?" I asked testily.

"I'm awfully sorry, Sir," came the reply. "I should be only too delighted to help, if I possibly could; but I assure you I know nothing whatever about the lights here."

"Man, you're an idiot! That's what's the matter with you; turning up to undertake a job when you don't know in the least how to set about it! Give me the keys!" I demanded.

"I'm really most terribly upset at having offended you, Sir," said the good man, rather timidly; "but as a matter of fact I only landed from America about an hour ago, and, seeing a glimmer of light through the window, I thought I would just look in at your famous church as I passed!"

So he wasn't Smith at all! And before I could recover from my astonishment, or attempt any sort of apology, the unknown gentleman was gone!

I expect he's told the story many a time—of the lunatic parson he once met, playing with the lights in a well-known church, and abusing any unfortunate visitor who would not help him in his "ritualism."

CHAPTER VI

THE DEEPER SIDE

RUNNING through the town where I first began serious work as a choir-boy was a gorgeous river—a joy to us all; because of the happy hours it afforded in the summer-time for boating on it, swimming in it, and fishing and walking by it; and often in the winter-time for skating and sliding near it, when it overflowed its banks and flooded the meadows before a hard frost.

At one favourite spot, where the river was very wide, there was a beautifully shallow part, with a gentle slope, almost like a sandy seashore. There the nippers who couldn't swim were able to paddle about and enjoy themselves mightily.

Yet, it was immediately opposite that spot, on the other side of the river, that a large notice-board was placed: DANGEROUS TO BATHERS. It was unusually deep there, besides being thick with treacherous weeds below, and subject to strong eddies in the particularly swift current which swept by the steep, forbidding bank, where the river took a curious turn. Even expert swimmers ventured there with the greatest possible caution.

So like life: that bend in the river, with its

shallower side, and its deeper side. Even choir-boys sometimes get out into the deep waters: it isn't all a thoughtless paddling about on a pleasant summer day, without ever a care for anything bigger or graver.

In this book of recollections I have so far recorded memories of lighter, sunnier experiences; because that was my object in writing it, rather than to enlarge upon the more solemn, serious side of life.

Yet it would be far from the truth, if I left you with the impression that an average choir-boy looks upon his work merely as a series of musical performances, intermingled with funny incidents and jolly times. Forty years' experience assures me that such is certainly not the case.

I am convinced that those five to seven years a boy spends in a choir have a deep and lasting effect upon his life. He may even turn out to be careless and wild in the days to come; but if one thing more than another is calculated to pull him up—perchance on the verge of ruin, or at the very gate of death—it is the fact that, in his early and most impressionable years, his mind and heart were brought into contact with greater things.

Naturally I can speak more confidently of my own remembrances of the deeper notes struck in old chorister times, but I believe I shall carry with me the majority of those who read these lines, and who were themselves choir-boys.

The first Sunday I sang in the choir of the old

church at home made an indelible impression upon my mind.

I am not thinking now of the glamour of appearing in a cassock and surplice for the first time. That, in my own case, had passed away, because—as I said in the first chapter—I had already been singing in a small country church before I was admitted as a member of the choir in my own home.

I have in mind specially the look on my parents' faces when I met them outside the church after the Service that first summer Sunday evening. It was more than a look of pride and joy that I saw there as I joined them. My dear mother's cheeks were frankly wet with tears, and there was a dangerous suspicion of them also in my father's eyes and voice, though he would have been the last to own it. Their boy in the choir—their little lad of so many hopes, and plans, and prayers! I saw dimly, even then, and I've found out much more since, what it must have meant to them. So that very first night, you see, I was carried across to the deeper side of the river.

True, I had the saintliest of mothers and the noblest of fathers, which made a huge difference; but I wonder how many careless parents have been brought to God's House, and started on an altogether changed course of life, just because their boy has been singing in the choir!

I recall, too, the absorbing interest of my chorister's work in those dear old times! It was just the one thing that I loved, and which provided

such a delightful hobby and relief from school and "prep."

It certainly took up a lot of time to be a choir-boy, and meant a daily task, with Sundays thrown in; yet now I can see how that was part of its greatest usefulness.

It is a splendid thing for a boy to have one big interest, apart from his ordinary school life, which calls for the patient and persistent use of many of the best talents he possesses. This must have a profound effect upon the formation of his character, his general outlook on life, and his usefulness in the world afterwards.

Again and again I have had parents in humble circumstances tell me how thankful they were that their boys, by being in the choir, were provided with something which occupied their evenings, and kept them from aimlessly racing the streets and getting into all sorts of bad company.

Looking back once more, I can see how the occupations and surroundings of those years opened for me, also, a door into the fascinating world of art.

Apart from the actual study of music, which in itself has been one of the deepest joys of after life, there grew up, unconsciously perhaps, a general interest in such things as Church Architecture, painting, sculpture, and art needlework.

I feel this is the case, not only with me personally, because I happen to have become a parson, and

therefore naturally to have been thrown in the way of these things since; but I believe this opening for the choir-boy of the door of art in some of its noblest forms has its marked effect upon the lives of a host of men in all walks of life.

I used to get a slight evidence of this when for some time I was privileged to be vicar of one of the oldest and most beautiful churches in our country. Visitors poured into the place daily, most of them gazing around on the glories of the building in a kind of vacant wonderment.

But here and there would be someone who seemed to know what he was looking for, and to be absorbed in every detail and bit of information the guide was imparting. If ever I ventured to say a word to any visitor of this kind, almost invariably I found that he was an old choir-boy, who, though he might not have sung in a choir for years, or have been a particularly keen Churchman, yet had discovered around him there a multitude of things, which wouldn't have interested him in the least, if it hadn't been for those days of long ago.

May I be pardoned a moment's digression here? Whilst writing of the many visitors at this glorious old Church, I am interested, on picking up a current journal, to see the following reference to the very place:—

“A short time ago a visitor was shown round — Priory by the most intelligent of vergers, who ended the tour of the building by remarking

that the Kaiser was escorted over the church, and signed the visitors' book.

"The signature was presently shown to the visitor, who said, 'The Kaiser is a friend of mine. In fact, quite recently, I believe, he expressed a strong wish to see me. May I sign my name under his?'

" 'Oh, no,' said the verger; 'but perhaps you will tell me your name.' The visitor did tell his name, whereupon the verger said: 'Sir, you may sign your name wherever you like.'

"He did sign it—under the Kaiser's; he signed 'Louis Raemaekers.' He was the great Dutch cartoonist, upon whom the Kaiser is reported to have put a price, dead or alive. For Louis Raemaekers is the man whose cartoons have revealed to the world how this monster appears to a neutral nation."

But, to return to our subject.

I have often wondered at some crowded performance of one of the great Oratorios, how many of the men present, both in the chorus and the audience, would have been there at all if they had not gained their first love of such music as choir-boys.

Another thing that grows up in the heart of the chorister, to remain with him in after years, is a homely, friendly feeling towards the church as a building. The particular church in which he spends those happy times in youth will, of course, always have tender memories, and it

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will ever be a joy to visit it in later days ; but other churches, too, will present an attraction, and offer a welcome to one who has learnt to be familiar with such buildings in childhood.

To such a mass of folk, alas ! a church generally appears as a gaunt, grim, forbidding place, which might as well be a Mohammedan Mosque, or a jail ; except that sometimes it may be almost as interesting as a museum, if only it happens to be historic, with a verger who will explain how, hundreds of years ago, strange people used to find it a warm, inviting home, where they loved to come to their beautiful Services.

You have to know a great deal about a place before it feels like home to you, which, of course, is what a church is meant to be to all its children.

During the Great War it fell to me to have a lot to do with three churches in different parts of the country—all of them famed for their architecture and appointments—where Parade Services were held. To the bulk of the men that one Service was enough for one Sunday ; but in each place we had the same experience : a certain number of them came voluntarily to Evensong later in the day, and were keenly interested in the building, the decorations, the music, and other things. Then, during the week we met those men in the clubs provided for the soldiers, and over and over again we found they were old choir-boys. To them, amidst the hardships of a rough life in a strange place, the church provided

a real touch of home, and a remembrance of the happier days of boyhood.

Another lasting mark of the influence of those early years of special training, as it touches the deeper elements of character, you may see at a holiday-time in any pleasure resort, where it is the custom for visitors to go and inspect some famous church in the district.

If you take your stand inside such a building, and watch the little parties come to look round, you will notice that the great majority do so in much the same way as they would pay a visit to Madame Tussaud's exhibition, or the Zoological Gardens.

But now and then you will see a good man with his family or friends, walking softly, talking in an undertone, refraining from laughing or joking aloud, making no attempt to force open the chancel gates, and generally behaving as if he were in a place specially set apart for Christian worship; and on that account different from a castle ruin or a picture gallery. In nine cases out of ten, if you ask that man you will find he was once a choir-boy. The deep feeling of awe and reverence instilled into his mind in early youth has remained there ever since.

This feeling of awe, reverence, honour, respect seems to have been rather at a discount in recent years; though there are signs that the depths which have been plumbed by so many, and the personal contact with the great realities of life

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and death which such numbers have experienced in the Great War, have tended to awaken and to deepen this sense more generally. True nobility of character can never be attained without it, and in fostering it the training of the chorister is doing one of its greatest works. We must never forget—we who have any sort of charge over choir-boys—that the work of the choir-master is to train, not only the voice, but the character of every boy under his care.

I wonder how many others will have had the same experience in this matter as myself! Looking back on those important years of boyhood, when so many lasting impressions were made, it seems to me that in the education of that deep side of life I have been speaking about, more was accomplished by what we saw and experienced than by any definite instruction we received. It was the atmosphere in which we lived and worked, which did far more to mould our characters than all the direct teaching we were given by word of mouth.

At the same time, of course, it would be a mistake to suppose that choir-boys pay no heed to sermons and instructions: they listen with both ears when there is anything interesting enough to arrest their attention. That has been my experience ever since I was a boy myself.

So, too, as a Precentor I know quite well the delicious feeling of relief which creeps over you as you sit down to listen to a sermon, and from

the very first word you realize that you will not only be interested yourself, but that the attention of the boys will be riveted the whole time.

You find by experience, too, that the preacher who succeeds in gaining the ear of the choir-boys is the very one the rest of the congregation most appreciate. If only that lesson could be learnt by all the men who occupy our pulpits !

There was a famous American preacher, who was once asked to what he most attributed his wonderful power of gripping congregations of all types, and holding them spellbound from start to finish of his sermons. He replied that it was the simple word of an old chapel deacon many years before, at the beginning of his ministry.

Back in those early days of enthusiasm and unbounded confidence in himself, this preacher was Sunday by Sunday delivering his sermons in a most profound manner and with elaborate diction ; well assured that these marks of erudition would impress and arouse the congregation to whom he had been called to minister.

One Sunday morning as the preacher left the vestry, and was about to mount the steps of his rostrum, an old grey-haired deacon ventured to approach and whisper in his ear : " There's a child in the church."

From that day the young man never forgot those words : he tried always to remember them as he ascended the pulpit ; and by preaching to that " child in the church " ever after, he gained

his remarkable power over all kinds of listeners—
young and old, rich and poor, learned and ignorant.

The same lesson was brought home to me in
another way some time ago, when I went for a
week-end to preach in a distant church.

From the study window on the Saturday after-
noon, I heard the youngsters playing on the lawn
outside. Evidently there were some small people
visiting the rectory children ; and they appeared
with an attractive toy motor-car, worked like a
tricycle. Apparently this had come to grief the
last time they had used it together ; for I heard
one of the boys of the house call out : “ O ! Harry !
who’s mended the car ? ”

“ Why, father did it for us this morning,” came
the answer. “ Isn’t he a brick ? ”

“ Rather ! I wish our father could mend toys ! ”
said a rectory child mournfully.

“ Ah ! But your father can preach sermons ! ”
the little girl who had come with her brother
ventured, in an awed voice.

“ Well, what’s the good of that to us ? ” asked
the mournful one instantly.

There was food for a preacher’s thought in that
child’s question : “ What’s the good of that to us ? ”

Like other people, choristers love a sermon
which has an illustration in it ; because at least
they can understand that part of it, even if the
rest is not clear and simple.

I have never attempted to make a list of illus-
trations which I may have noticed in my own

preaching seemed specially to appeal to the choir-boys, but certainly three stand out clearly in my mind, owing to the fact that the boys afterwards were eager to discuss them with me, and to learn, if possible, more about the people mentioned in them.

The first of these naturally appealed to the lads, seeing that the story was actually about a small choir-boy, who, hearing his vicar one Sunday evening pleading in a despondent way with his people to rouse themselves to fresh efforts to raise funds for the building of their permanent church, which he feared would never be begun, wrote that very night the following letter to cheer him :—

MY DEAR VICAR,

Don't you go worrying about that money for the new church. I am sending you in this letter sixpence which I have saved up, and if you want any more, look to me ! Your loving choir-boy,

TOM.

The other two illustrations were longer ones, and perhaps contained special elements of appeal to boys. At any rate they were remembered, and I was often questioned about them, and asked to repeat them. Boys will listen time after time to a story they like, if you will only have patience to tell it over again.

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Both these anecdotes were of personal experiences, which may have added to their force. I venture to give them here.

One story was to illustrate how God often chooses strange and unlooked-for ways of speaking with a clear voice to us.

In the years during which I was preparing for Ordination I got to know intimately a family, which consisted of a young husband and wife, and their sweet little girl, who was about three years old at the time of this incident.

The wife was one of the most charming characters I have ever met—loving and lovable; but the husband, though passionately attached to his wife and child, was erratic, unbalanced, and very highly strung.

Just as term was ending before Christmas, I heard of the serious illness of my friend's wife; and, as soon as I could leave my college, I went to the town where they lived, to make a call. Arriving in the early evening, I was shown into the dining-room by a maid, who informed me that her master was engaged with two doctors, in consultation over the grave turn matters had taken.

In great anxiety I waited as patiently as I could, for something over half an hour; till my friend had dismissed the physicians, and was able to come to me. As he entered the room I was struck, not only with his worn and haggard appearance, but with the wild and restless look in his eyes, which seemed to speak of a mind beside itself with

anguish. I wondered as he turned, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket, after he entered the room ; but at the moment I attributed it to his absent-mindedness during such a strain.

Our handshake was a silent one, which meant much, and when we were both seated I waited, still without speaking, for the latest opinion of the doctors.

“ Old chap, I’m glad you’ve come,” my friend began, in a voice hoarse and halting, as he moistened his parched lips, “ because it’s near the end, and you are the very man I wanted to see. Poor Flo has been unconscious all day, and they’ve just told me she won’t last through the night. I can’t see her die, old fellow ; and when she is gone, life for me won’t be worth living. So, I’m determined to make away with myself, here and now ! ”

To my horror the poor, over-wrought man took from his pocket a revolver, loaded and cocked, and laid it on the table near his hand, as he continued : “ Only there are just one or two little things I want you to do for me after we’re both gone—things I couldn’t ask anyone else to see to.”

“ But, my dear Charlie,” I said, aghast, “ you can’t mean what you’re saying. Stop a moment, and think of the awful thing you are proposing to do ! I can feel for you, from the bottom of my heart, in this affliction ; but play the man, old chap ; keep your head up, and see the thing through ; for Flo’s sake ! Think what it would

be for her, if in God's providence she recovered, only to find that you had been a coward and left her alone in the world, to bear the disgrace of your mad act ! ”

“ Don't preach at me, old boy,” replied my companion, with an uncanny quietness in his voice. “ I've thought it all out. There's no earthly chance of Flo's recovery, and as I can't live without her, I mean to go before her to the other side of the river, and wait for her there.”

“ How can you talk in such a way, my friend ? ” I questioned. “ Do you seriously suppose that a saintly woman, and a man whose last act in this world was to murder himself, would be allowed to meet and be together in the great beyond ? Listen to reasonable argument, I implore you ; and don't think again of your dreadful proposal.”

“ What do you mean by reasonable argument, man ? ” asked the desperate fellow, moving his hand till it rested over the revolver. “ There is no argument that would turn me from my purpose, now my mind is once made up about it. Besides, you are wasting time ; and if you won't listen to me and offer to help in the way I want, I'll blow your brains out first, and then see to myself.”

“ For God's sake, Charlie,” I pleaded (as I remembered in a flash the tremendous sporting instinct of my demented friend, and a sudden inspiration seized me in the midst of my terror), “ listen to me ; for I do know an argument that would arrest you, and make you change your

mind. If you'll be sportsman enough to give me five minutes, and come with me, I'll undertake to convince you by that argument, without uttering a single word."

"What in the world do you mean?" asked the wretched man; and I saw that for a moment his attention had been taken off his horrible purpose.

"Exactly what I say," I replied, eager to seize my advantage, and to keep his thoughts elsewhere. "Do you accept my offer? Isn't it sporting enough—five minutes to induce you to change your mind, without my saying a word? And if I fail within that time, then you are at liberty to take your life, and mine too, if you choose."

"Done, old chap!" said Charlie, springing to his feet. "Though what your little game is I haven't the least idea."

Here was my offer accepted with alacrity, but my heart almost failed me as I rose to put my plan into execution.

I was hoping my friend would leave that awful weapon behind. But, no! He closed his hand upon it, and pointing it at me, with his finger on the trigger, unlocked the door—as I beckoned to him to do—and then, coolly taking out his watch, motioned me to lead the way.

With the perspiration trickling down my back I passed in front of him, and, crossing the hall, began ascending the stairs. How can I ever forget that awful climb? My feet appeared to be

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weighted with tons of lead, and every step I mounted, it seemed as if I must collapse in a dead faint.

But I tried to dart up a prayer for strength, and went slowly on as in a dream, till I reached the nursery door, which stood ajar. This I pushed open and entered softly, going across the room to the corner I knew well, where, in the daintiest of cots, the soft, subdued light revealed the dearest of little children, with her golden curls a veritable halo about her head, and the sweetest of dream smiles playing about her lips.

Charlie was hard upon my heels, and as I turned and faced him I pointed in silence to his sleeping child. I was hardly prepared for the sudden effect it had upon him. He fell on his knees by the side of the little bed ; held out the revolver for me to take from him ; and then buried his head in his hands and sobbed out his broken heart.

I crept away on tiptoe ; for I felt instinctively the poor fellow ought to be alone with the Voice that was speaking to him.

Do you wonder that the choir-boys had many questions to ask about that experience ? What became of the revolver ? Did the gentleman ever think anything more about shooting himself ? Did the lady die or recover ? What happened to the little girl ? Had I ever seen any of them since ?

Here is the other anecdote : told in rather more detail than I had time for in my sermon.

When I was a little lad, a favourite excursion was a drive with my father, across the neighbouring hills, to an aunt who lived some miles away, and had the most delicious country garden imaginable—apple trees, cherry trees, plum trees, and many other delights dear to a boy's heart.

The drive itself formed a large part of the joy of the outing. It was pretty country we passed through, and we stopped at a half-way inn, snugly set in a shady place at the edge of a wood, which stretched away up the hill behind.

The very thought of a bottle of creamy ginger-beer in a tall glass, on a bright summer morning, at this inviting little creeper-covered resting place made my mouth water long before we got there ; and as we approached the spot I invariably urged a halt.

Our refreshment was served at a table outside the house, under the trees, where, in a corner by the doorway, there sat an old, old man with a long white beard, silently smoking his big church-warden pipe. You never saw him talking to anyone, and if you passed the time of day with him, his only answer was a sort of growl. He seemed to be a most miserable old party ; though you always associated him with the place ; and you would have missed him quickly if he had not been there, so much was he part and parcel of the scene.

I had many questions to ask my father after our first visit ; but all he could tell me about the old

man was that he was the proprietor of the establishment, and that for many years he had sat like that, silent and morose. People said that he once had some great sorrow, which came near unhinging his mind ; and that he sat day after day, and even year after year, brooding over it. So they felt sympathy with him, and continued to wish him a polite good-day ; though they got only a grunt and a nod in reply.

This all added to the mystery of the old man ; and whenever we passed that way I found myself wondering what he was really thinking about, as he sat there hour after hour. I longed to go boldly up and ask him, but I could never summon up courage enough to do that : there was something so grim and almost uncanny about him. So, like everyone else, I left him alone with his pipe and his thoughts.

It was some years after that I heard of the old man's death, and of the remarkable story of his early life. In a box with his Will was found a sealed envelope, with directions that it should not be opened till he was dead and buried. This packet contained, in his own writing, an account of a great happening long past, and revealed the mystery of those many hours of sullen brooding.

Nearly half a century before, the innkeeper had come as a young man to the place, where he had been hail-fellow-well-met to all who greeted him. He was fond of every kind of country pursuit ; proud of his garden ; a keen sportsman ; a jolly

companion ; and a good host to his customers. Business flourished under his management ; till in time he became the owner as well as the landlord of the house.

It was a sporting district, famed for its hunting and shooting, and mine host was a friend of the gentry, the farmers, the stablemen, the keepers, the beaters and the labourers alike. They all found their way to his model little dwelling at one time or another.

Many were the exciting stories of adventure in the chase, of record shoots, and of encounters with poachers which enlivened winter evenings in the cosy bar parlour, or summer nights under the overhanging trees in front of the inn. And who could tell a story, whether grave or gay, half so well as the landlord himself ? He was the centre and life of any party ; his laugh the most contagious ; and his good-humour the most un-failing.

One memorable, cold, late-autumn evening, however, there was no laughter heard in the little parlour ; for a tragedy had occurred in the wood hard by, and the innkeeper was absent—prostrate at the loss of one of his most intimate friends.

The dead man was head gamekeeper on the neighbouring estate, and during the previous night, whilst getting over a stile at the entrance to a wood, but a few hundred yards from the inn, he had slipped and fallen ; and in doing so had touched

the trigger of his gun, which had gone off and shot him dead.

The body had been found early that morning, and brought to the little hostelry, where the host was altogether broken up by this sudden death of the companion he was laughing and joking with only the afternoon before.

The subsequent inquest established the accidental nature of the keeper's death, seeing that no sign of any struggle could be discovered near the fatal stile, nor any tell-tale footprints leading from the spot ; while the shots found in the body were obviously from the spent cartridge in the man's own gun, found by his side, with a second unused cartridge, of the peculiar kind he favoured, still left in the other barrel. The wound was shown, also, to be in a position most natural under the obvious circumstances.

The innkeeper never recovered from the shock ; nor was he ever seen to smile again. His friends respected his sorrow, though they wondered at its long continuance. After a time, more than one acquaintance tried to rouse him out of his brooding, but all to no avail : he kept to himself, and seldom spoke a word.

The tragedy so preyed upon the man's mind that at last he summoned a nephew to take charge of his business, while he went away for a long rest and change.

Little or no benefit did this afford, however, and the old place seemed to lure him with such

a strange fascination that he returned to live once more at the inn, though it remained in the hands of his nephew as manager.

So the years went by ; and the once young and gay landlord became the white-haired old man, broken and solitary, morbidly day after day living in his thoughts of that terrible event, which had happened so many years before, and had ruined his happiness and his life.

To this point, I suppose, the story might have been told by anyone intimate with the district for any length of time, without the aid of the document left with the old man's Will ; but it was the rest of the narrative that provided such a startling disclosure.

In his younger days—mainly, no doubt, because of the excitement and risk of adventure—unknown to his companions, the old man had been a skilful poacher ; and on the fatal day, from his conversation with his friend the keeper, he gathered that the coast would be clear that night in the wood behind his inn. So, when he judged all to be safe, he stole out of the house, with two pieces of wood cleverly fastened under his boots, to avoid making any footmarks.

By a curious coincidence, the keeper, when he left the inn that afternoon, had picked up the landlord's gun by mistake, from the corner where they both happened to be standing together ; and the innkeeper did not notice this till he himself took the gun that remained, and looked to see if it

were loaded. Thus, by the strangest of chances, he set out with the keeper's gun ; never dreaming what would eventually hang upon his doing so.

Arrived at the spot where he intended to begin operations, the poacher was busy preparing his trap ; when he heard an unexpected noise near at hand, and glancing up over his shoulder, saw a dim figure climbing the stile almost on top of him. In the rush and confusion of his surprise, without stopping a moment to think, he picked up his gun and fired point blank at the man, who fell, with a groan, and then lay perfectly still.

The horror of what had happened dawned upon the wretched innkeeper, when by the light of a match he discovered who the man was, and that he was dead. Suddenly he realized that his friend had been killed with his own gun, and that, because of that very fact he himself might escape the penalty of his awful deed. He therefore placed the keeper's weapon by his side, while he picked up the other one, and returned with it to the inn, hoping that when that night's work was discovered it might be put down to an accident.

That is, indeed, what happened, as has been related ; but though no shadow of suspicion ever rested upon the murderer, the voice of Conscience never ceased to speak to him till the day of his death.

I was led to relate these incidents because they serve to illustrate the fact that choir-boys often pay great attention to preaching. I have been

astonished to find that the most unlikely boys have taken note of something said long before, which I should have imagined would escape them altogether.

The boys listen critically, not only to sermons, but to anything else they hear in church. This is the kind of thing I mean :

Walking away from the vestry one day with some of the elder choir-boys, I was amused at the remark of one of them : " So the Canon has given away the church door again this morning, Sir."

" What do you mean ? " I asked.

" Why, Sir, he announced as he nearly always does at these times : ' Full particulars of the special Services during Lent will be found in the papers on the table at the door of the church, which you are requested to take away with you.' "

So he had ! I remembered then, and he said the same words again that evening. But the boys had been smarter than I to note the slip.

At another time I was struck with the way a little bit of exhortation had sunk into the mind of one of the smaller choir-boys, and had borne delightfully unselfish fruit.

I had been talking to the young people in church, just before Lent, about the practice of self-denial which that season expected ; mentioning specially that this voluntary giving up of certain things we had a perfect right to, was not only, nor even chiefly, for our own good, but first of all in order that we might benefit someone else.

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As an illustration of this, I remember saying that even children might sacrifice some little luxury, like the buying of so many sweets, and thus be able to save a few of their pennies to give, when Lent was over, to help other children living in poor slums, who not only had to go without sweets, but very often without even necessary food.

At the end of Lent the smallest choir-boy sent me a good-sized toffee tin, filled with sweets of all kinds, and accompanied by a quaint little note, saying that these were sweets which had been given him during the past six weeks, but which he had put by in the box for some poor child who got no sweets at all; if I would be so kind as to send them to anyone like that.

When I looked through that rather sticky collection, and saw how some of those treasures had been fondly handled before being finally relinquished, and remembered, too, that this child had actually before his eyes the sight of his sacrificed wealth, every time he opened that box to put in another contribution, I realized that he had got far nearer the heart of self-denial than perhaps the majority of grown-ups that Lent.

We have been speaking of the lasting effect produced upon the life and character of the chorister by the surroundings and the teaching of the church in which he spends so much of his time. Yet, what is that, compared with the influence of his own home?

Here we are at fundamentals—at the great thing

that really matters in all questions of the deep impressions made upon the youthful mind: I mean the home life and influence. You see the stamp of home upon every choir-boy; and in that atmosphere of the home you have your greatest ally or foe in any work of moulding character you undertake.

Tiny straws show the direction of the stream, in this as in other things.

Not long ago it was a delight to accept an invitation to tea with one of the choir-boys. After the Children's Service that Sunday afternoon there was much excitement among the small members of this family, who met me at the church door to conduct me to their home.

It was a nipper of five who seized my hand and launched out into an animated conversation, eager to know more about the people in the story I had been telling in church. After a minute or two I noticed the little chap was carrying in his other hand a Teddy Bear.

So, Teddy had been to church! In a moment I got a vision of a Sunday, some years before, in another fashionable church, where, to everyone's amazement, a small child, with his indulgent mother, came in (and late, too) to the Young People's Service, parading right up to the front; the youngster staggering under the weight of a huge Teddy Bear, not much smaller than himself. Down they sat, with Teddy arranged on a separate seat!

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So far, so good, but the thunderbolt fell, when, in a quiet moment of the address, Teddy received a sounding whack, which knocked him clean off his chair into the aisle ; and a shrill little voice sounded throughout the big church : “ You miserable Teddy ! Why can’t you sit still and behave yourself when you are taken out on a Sunday ? ”

It required the exercise of all the authority I possessed to ward off an uproarious scene. The only thing to do was to order, in the sternest of tones, the instant departure of that mother, child, and bear ; though the dear lady didn’t get over her chagrin for months, and made all sorts of threats about never entering the church again.

Can you wonder that, at the sight of the smaller Teddy on the Sunday in question, I was anxious to avoid any repetition of the former experience, by suggesting that it might perhaps be better to leave all toys at home when we came to church, even the sagacious animal my companion was then carrying so tenderly.

“ Well, you see,” said the small person, “ *this* Teddy Bear has some little ones at home, and I thought it would be quite a good thing if he came to church ! ”

What earthly argument could I bring against such obvious logic ? We pursued the subject no further.

It was a joy to see this straw upon the stream, which showed that Church meant very much indeed to parents and children together in that home.

This mention of the home in connection with the deeper side of the choir-boy's life makes me remember, with heartfelt gratitude for the beautiful lessons they have taught me, the mothers of so many choristers.

Only once have I taken such drastic action as to dismiss a Sunday School Teacher on the spot, but my indignation was then roused to such a pitch that I could find no other means of expressing it; and though it may have appeared discourteous, I cannot help feeling that under similar circumstances I should do the same again.

That Sunday morning as I passed through the school I noticed a youngster standing near his class in tears. Evidently he had been put there for some misbehaviour; yet I was surprised to find that particular lad had been dropped on, for he was a child whose conduct hitherto had been exemplary. He was one of the youngest choir-boys, from a pattern, though a poor home; his mother being a saint indeed.

I touched the lad on the shoulder, and beckoned him to follow me to the Superintendent's desk, where I asked him why he had been punished in that way. He gave a heart-breaking sob before he could answer.

"Teacher said I was a disgrace to the Sunday School, because I'd come with darned and patched clothes; but I know mother hasn't any more to send me in, Sir"; and the little fellow sobbed again.

My blood boiled, and my face flushed for very shame at the insult to a brave woman, who spent hours in keeping her children clean and tidy, in spite of grinding poverty ; and to a child who was proud of his mother, whom he loved passionately.

Then and there I sent about her business that silly, dressed-up doll, who dared to call herself a lady.

Some years before, in a different parish, I felt it an honour to know another choir-boy's mother, for the very beauty of her character. She, too, was poor, and she not only mended but actually made all her own clothes, and those of her three children. How she managed to find even the time for it, with the other work she had to do, was a mystery.

One very severe winter I was glad to see this good mother's little boy come to church about Christmas-time with a new suit of warm clothes under his rather threadbare overcoat, and I remember wondering how many hours his patient mother had sat up at that heavy needlework, when she ought to have been in bed. It wasn't until some time after that I discovered she had made those clothes out of a thick brown shawl, which a kind friend had given her for her own use, because she saw what miserably poor clothing the mother herself was obliged to go out in during such bitter weather !

It goes without saying that there are a number of choir-boys, who don't by any means live in

slums, yet who feel the pinch of poverty. Only they who have actually tasted of it know, for instance, what the poverty of the clergy really means. Many a struggling vicar finds it a considerable help to have his boy in a cathedral choir and school. Few things have stirred me more than a brother parson's story of an old chum, in charge of a church where only a starvation income was his reward for faithful service.

I think it was the saddest thing of the kind I ever heard, when my friend told how that man's brave wife, who—poor thing—was dying of cancer, sat up and with her own hands made, out of old dresses which she herself would never need again, the black frocks for her little girls to wear after her death.

What a scandal it is that such a thing should exist in any Christian Church !

It is a privilege to come into contact with such women as I have spoken of ; they are the very salt of the earth. I often wonder how many of us really know a tithe of what our own mothers have done and sacrificed for us, with a glad heart and a smiling face, though it may have cost them their very life-blood in the doing !

One other special remembrance of a choir-boy and his mother comes to me as I write. He was a little fellow who had not long been in the choir, and his mother was dangerously ill.

That very day I had seen the poor sufferer, almost I feared for the last time ; for her strength was

ebbing slowly away, and the doctors gave no hope. Dear soul, what a sweet, refreshing character she had ! It was a privilege to minister to her or to be in her presence. And what a tremendous bond of love there was binding her and her chorister boy together ! They were all in all to each other.

That evening, after the choir practice had been some time over, I unexpectedly came upon this little lad, hurrying along by the brightly lighted shops in the main street of the town, his face beaming, and carrying a paper bag with tender care.

“ Good evening, Will ! ” said I, as he raised his cap. “ How’s mother to-night ? Is there any change ? ”

“ No, Sir ! ” he replied, “ she’s about the same, thank you ! But,” he added, with a smile, “ she’ll soon be all right now ; I’ve got the very thing for her at last ”—holding up his bag.

“ Have you, my dear boy ? ” I said, with some astonishment. “ What is it you’ve been buying ? ”

“ Well, you see, Sir, it’s like this,” answered the nipper. “ I’ve kept on thinking all those grapes, and medicine, and things don’t seem to be doing mother a bit of good : perhaps they’re not the right sort of thing. So, I’ve been saving up to buy something for her, and this afternoon I found I’d got fourpence. I ran home and fetched it after rehearsal this evening, and came out again to spend it.”

" But I've had an awful job to find the right thing, Sir. I went up and down this street both sides, looking in all the shop windows, and I couldn't see anything anywhere ; till, just as I was thinking it was no good looking any more, I suddenly remembered how mother always likes what I like best. So, I thought if I got what I should like most myself, she'd be sure to enjoy it, and that would be the very thing to pull her round again ; and I went straight back to the shop and bought it, Sir "—pointing to his precious bag.

Here was enthusiasm indeed, and I was full of curiosity to know what the boy, after his quaint philosophy, had secured for his dying mother : so I asked once more what it might be.

In reply, the little chap very carefully opened the top of the bag, to show me his purchase ; and when I looked in I saw, to my utter astonishment, a very hard and indigestible-looking *fourpenny pork pie* !

I thought of that frail woman, practically *in extremis* when I left her that afternoon, whose lips I had been obliged to moisten as I sat by her bedside ; and then I looked again at this panacea for all her suffering weakness—a pork pie ! But I daren't show the least flicker of a smile, because that child's eyes were fixed upon me, in dead earnest, full of the joy of his discovery of what would bring his mother back from the very gate of death. I was

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suddenly touched with the pathos of it, and could only say, rather huskily, I'm afraid, as I patted him on the head :

“ That's right, my son ; you'd better hurry back with it now ! ”

The marvel was that the boy's prescription was entirely successful ! He ran all the way home ; demanded a tray set out for a meal ; arranged his treasure on it ; cut off a tempting chunk—such as he himself would have loved—and went straight up to the sick room with it all, out of breath, but radiant ; and he burst in upon his mother saying :

“ Here you are, mother darling ! I've got the very thing ; and I've bought it all with my own money ! You'll be all right in a jiffy now.”

At the sudden avalanche the sweet woman looked up, and then raised herself with a big effort. When she saw the proposed remedy, ill as she was, she was obliged to laugh. She promised to do her best ; only her boy, when he'd kissed her, must go down and leave her to enjoy the feast alone.

That was the turning-point of her illness. The patient mother seemed to take a new interest in life, and to make a super-human effort to recover.

The nurse ate the pie, so as not to disappoint the devoted boy, who never knew of the deception. And the mother, from the moment of that laugh, grew steadily better.

There's little doubt, then, that the choir-boy

comes into touch with the deeper side of things, not only in church, but also in his own home; though it's just there at home that so often the good people have a knack of "rubbing it in"—this deeper side of a chorister's work. It's so constantly being held over the poor, unfortunate boy as a solemn injunction and warning.

"How can a boy who is privileged to wear a white surplice—who is set up before others as an example of reverence and good behaviour—who has more chances than many children of learning what is right—who is every day taking upon his lips such sacred words—and so on—how can such a boy be so troublesome, and do such dreadful things?"—the dreadful things, more often than not, being innocent little amusements, or at any rate harmless and natural in the lad's own eyes.

Didn't you hear all this, and much more, when it was your lot to be a choir-boy; and haven't you propounded the same theory to your own boy, now that you've grown up, and he's in the old choir?

Well, I suppose such an argument has its right and proper use, and there are serious occasions when, as Precentor, I have been able to fall back upon it with effect; but I'm sure that "rubbing it in" at every conceivable opportunity, and over silly, trivial faults, is the very worst thing possible. It's like the old, bad custom of using the Church

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Catechism as a punishment—so many questions and answers to be learnt for certain offences of childhood. Such methods only lead to a loathing of the very thing you want to create a deep respect and love for.

It all comes back to me now—my own first experience of the “rubbing in” process. Away in that charming country rectory I spoke of in my first chapter, the sweetest of grandmothers, finding her choir-boy grandson a bit of a handful, tried to awaken in him a glimmer of conscience by this lofty ideal argument.

Out under the trees of the delightful orchard at the back of the rectory, the old lady discovered me—a little London boy of the advanced age of eight, having the time of my life ; and sadly she addressed me :

“ My darling, I am shocked and grieved that anyone who looks so innocent, and sings so sweetly in the choir on Sundays, should break his word the very next day. Only last week you promised me faithfully that you would never send the dog after the hens any more, and now I’ve just seen you do it again, because I’m afraid you thought that out here no one would discover you, and that I should never know.”

“ No, grandma, I haven’t broken my promise : indeed I haven’t ! ” I replied, with eagerness.

“ But, my child, how can you say such a thing, when you know very well that only a few minutes ago you deliberately sent Rover scampering all

down the orchard after the hens, while you clapped your hands, and cheered him as he went chasing and frightening them to death ? ”

“ I didn’t send him after the hens at all, grandma : I was most careful not to,” I argued. “ I said to him quite distinctly : ‘ Now, Rover, not the hens—*not* the hens, mind ! You mustn’t touch one of the hens : it’s the old cock I want you to chase—it’ll do him good, because he’s a lazy old beggar ! Go for him, Rover : go for him ! ’ And so he did, grandma, only the silly hens would keep getting in his way.”

But I couldn’t induce the old lady to see it from my point of view : she still persisted that I was a disgrace to the whole choir-boy fraternity.

Sometimes the boys of a choir find themselves out upon the deep waters of life, when serious illness or death seizes one of their number ; and then repeatedly I have been struck with the calm, trustful, courageous, hopeful way they have faced these dread enemies, in contrast with the disturbed, despairing fashion in which these things are so often met by those to whom religion is but a name, and the life beyond the grave but a mirage.

A very close bond of companionship springs up between choristers who are so often together in their work and their play ; and the sickness of any member of the choir is keenly felt, with affectionate concern, by the rest. Repeated calls of inquiry are made, often by the most unlikely

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boys in the choir ; while flowers and other (sometimes quaint) gifts for remembrance, are sent through those who may be privileged to see the one who is ill ; and willing offers to lend, to give, or to do any- and everything are made continually.

The death and burial of a choir-boy makes a profound impression upon all—the solemn funeral, attended by his brother choristers ; and the vacant seat in the choir-stalls, marked on the following Sunday by the placing there of the lad's cassock and surplice, with a floral wreath or cross of hope laid upon them, are things which provide an abiding memory.

Only yesterday I happened to find myself in the town where I passed my happiest choir-boy days, and as I went by a certain house, standing pleasantly back from the road in its own grounds, the recollection of many jolly hours spent there came back to me ; but, more vividly still, the remembrance of a never-to-be-forgotten afternoon when the angel of death was hovering near that home.

The only son of the house was decidedly senior to any boy in our choir, and he was the most popular fellow I think I ever knew. After a long illness, little hope of recovery was held out, but the doctor pronounced that no harm could come from the granting of an urgent request of the patient's that some of his chums from the choir might sing in their surplices round his bed. Six

of us were chosen ; and I never had a harder task of singing to perform.

We entered the bedroom noiselessly, and our hearts almost fainted at the shock of seeing the thin, white face of the companion who had always been such a picture of health amongst us. There was no need for the injunction that everything should be *pianissimo* : I wonder any of us was able to utter a sound.

We sang — unaccompanied, of course — the favourite hymns of the dying lad, and we all did our level best ; but after a few verses, one of our number was so overcome that he slipped quietly out of the room. Then, soon after, a second boy found his voice so choked that he, too, went out ; so as not to give way to a sob there at the bedside.

O ! how hard it was to go on singing, with a big lump in your throat, and the other boys breaking down and leaving one by one ! Yet somebody had to see it through, and that somebody turned out to be myself ; for at last I was there alone, struggling all I knew how to finish the hymn.

I was afterwards voted by the rest to be the hardest-hearted kid in the choir ; though none of them knew what it cost me to keep going after they had given in. I was as sensitive to it all as they were ; but when I saw how they gradually dropped out, a sort of desperate feeling seized me that it would be mean to distress the sick lad by letting

him see that we couldn't do a little thing like that for him.

So I managed to continue ; only, as I got to the end of that hymn, and thought nothing more would be required, I heard poor Harry whisper from the bed, where he lay back with closed eyes, that he'd like just one more—"Lead, kindly Light." That I had to begin and go through with quite on my own, but at last it was finished, and I got out of the room only in the nick of time ; for I burst into tears as the door closed behind me.

I have never sung that hymn since, without the picture of that sick chamber coming up before me. I believe that is the main reason why we love certain hymns so much—the old associations they conjure up in our minds every time we sing them.

One other experience of a similar kind remains green in my memory : it occurred some years later, in undergraduate days.

I was back in the same town for a vacation, when I learnt that an old choir-boy chum, who had been away for a long time undergoing treatment for consumption, was home again, incurable and dying ; though still as bright and cheery as he had been all through his distressing illness. He was twenty-two, and it was a sore blow to his widowed mother to be losing such an affectionate and promising son. Yet she and he were both brave and patient together.

Many times during that holiday I found my way to my old friend's bedside, and they were happy

meetings, in spite of the sad circumstances. But the day before I had to return to my studies we both felt we had come to our last farewell. As I rose to go, and held the shrunken hand in mine, the same old musical, sympathetic voice I had loved for so long, said :

“ Good-bye, old chap ; and good luck to you ! Remember me next year when you come to your Ordination, won’t you ? You know it is the one thing I have always longed for myself ; but now that can never be—at least here in this world ; though there’s no telling what may be possible on the other side.

“ I expect we shall often think of one another in the years to come, even in different worlds ; don’t you, old fellow ? And we shall remember specially the good old days we used to spend in the choir, eh ? Grand times, weren’t they ?

“ Do you know, I’ve been thinking these last few days of that old *Story of the Cross* we sang during Lent each year. We used to share those solo verses, you and I, didn’t we ? It was the last part I loved so much in Redhead’s setting : the change of tune for those verses was so bright, and joyous, and hopeful. You’ll find a copy on the little organ over there, old chap. Just sing the part before the last, will you ? Then we can both do the last bit together once more.”

I sat down and played and sang alone, as I was asked, till I came to the last four verses, when the voice of my friend joined in, soft and mellow still ;

and some kind angel prevented any fit of coughing while he sang.

No words could have been more appropriate, under such conditions, for our last good-bye ; and never shall I sing them again without having that scene in the little bedroom clear before my eyes.

CHAPTER VII

AND AFTER

“AND after.” These words form part of the title of a famous Magazine: they may also serve as the heading of something far less renowned—the last chapter of this book, in which appear a few incidents in the after life of choir-boys.

Sometimes one wonders whether there really is an “after” in most choir-boys’ lives; for no doubt it is so often true—once a chorister, always a chorister. How many continue without a break in the old choir, simply transferring their seats to the stalls in the row behind! Or, if they move away from the place, they lose little time in joining the choir in the new parish where their lot may be cast.

If, too, you strive to keep the child life alive in yourself, you find that you still live in the younger generation of choir-boys, entering into their experiences and thoughts—aye, and even into their pranks and scrapes—just because you remain in such full sympathy with them; while you dismiss the thought that you are getting old in anything but years.

It may be a confession of lamentable weakness,

but surprisingly often, when I have had as Precentor to make judicial inquiry and take stern measures in serious breaches of that law and order which must obtain in any well-regulated choir, in my heart of hearts I have been dying to enter into the whole escapade with the boys, from their point of view, and to talk over, as one of the gang, the joy of the adventure from its first planning to its final carrying out.

My own experience has been limited to town life, but in churches I have been connected with it has been astonishing to note the effect which their special work in boyhood's days has had upon the after life of choristers.

I am thinking particularly of my own chums in those now rather far-away times, and it is pleasant to remember how many of them have since devoted their whole lives to the Church for which their first privilege was to sing. There are priests, both at home and abroad, who once sang by my side as youngsters ; while there is a larger number who now adorn the great profession of music, and can put *Mus.Doc.*, *Mus.Bac.*, *F.R.C.O.*, and other letters of distinction after their names. Some became schoolmasters, one an architect, another an artist ; and these have had ample opportunity for devoting their talents to the Church. So also, in many more indirect ways, their early life and training has affected the after career of other companions of my youth.

That dreaded period, which comes between the

“breaking” of the boy’s voice and the settling down of the man’s, is always a difficult one to fill in. They who elect to continue in the choir are still valuable as altos ; but many think it wiser to give the voice a complete rest then, and not a few of these develop naturally into Altar Servers.

In churches where such Servers’ work is valued and has been long-established, the training of the lads as they leave the boys’ choir is easily managed ; but where the use of these Church Workers is a new development, their instruction at the beginning is not the easy thing it might at first sight appear.

In one parish where I went with a new vicar, such helpers as Servers had never been heard of. Yet we sadly needed someone of the sort ; for in neither of our two churches was there anybody to give that kind of assistance.

Our first Sunday morning in the parish emphasized the need of a Server, to manage a multitude of little things for us at the altar. That evening the vicar and I met for a meal together, and we recounted our adventures in the two churches during the eventful day.

I wish you could have heard the vicar tell of his experience at the early morning Celebration. He arrived in good time ; so as to see that everything was in order, according to his liking. As he entered the church, the old parish clerk was just coming out of the vestry in his shirtsleeves ! He limped to the sanctuary (for he had a game leg, as

well as only one working eye ; and he was as deaf as a post) where he reached down one of the two altar-candles, and stood it on the floor ! Then he took out of his pocket a box of matches, struck one, lighted the candle, and replaced it ! Before he had time to repeat the process on the other side he was called back to the vestry in stern tones.

There was a stormy interview between the vicar and the clerk, the latter being told that under no circumstances was he ever to enter the sanctuary again.

Away hobbled the old man to the bottom of the church, where in the tower was fixed an iniquitous apparatus, which enabled anyone to chime all eight bells, and also to play tunes upon them. Ugh !

That morning the clerk, still ruffled, went straight to his ringing, and struck up : “ Fierce raged the tempest o’er the deep.”

One small bell the distressed old fellow kept going till the vicar came from the vestry to begin the Service. Then he shut up the chiming cupboard with a bang, as though he were a railway guard slamming the carriage doors of his train. You almost expected to hear him blow a whistle and shout : “ Right away ! ”

The kâfuffle in the tower being ended, the ancient one clattered up the middle of the church, in thick hob-nailed boots, going dot-and-carry-one owing to his lameness, on into the chancel, to the end choir-stall nearest the altar rails. There he had

been allowed to sit because he was deaf, so that he might hear a little, and lead the responses, and generally tumble over himself, and knock his bad knee against the seat in trying to help with the alms and other things.

When all this, and much more of the same kind, had gone on for some weeks, we began to feel how badly Servers were wanted ; so we determined to train for this purpose some of the lads who had but recently left the choir.

O ! the trouble that awaited us ! The young fellows were willing helpers. Some took to the work naturally and quickly, but others, alas ! seemed as if they would never tumble to what was required, however simple and obvious were the things they were asked to do.

One of these latter was the son of the old clerk himself, whose services it seemed wise to enlist in this matter, as a set-off against any sore feeling the old man might still harbour at having part of his work given over to " a parcel of young simpletons," as he affectionately termed them. Certainly his beloved son, Fred, did his best to deserve the title.

Into this son's special charge was given a pair of handsome brass candelabra, which had just been presented to the parish church, to hang from the roof on either side of the sanctuary, and brighten up that dark end of the church in the evening. These things held about twenty ordinary candles each, and Fred's job was to clean them every week,

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and see that they were always supplied with candles.

You would never guess what happened the first Sunday evening they were lit. Fred was to light the candles before the Service, and put them out after. I carefully explained to him how the new extinguisher was to be used: it was fitted on a long handle; so that the candelabra might be reached easily.

There was nothing amiss with the lighting of the candles, but, somehow, when the Service was over, and I had sent the Server into the church to extinguish them, I had an uncomfortable feeling that everything was not quite right. So, I looked out of the vestry door; and O! the vision that met my eyes!

Fred had grasped the fact that he was to stand on the floor to put out the candles, as he had done to light them; but when I caught sight of him then, he was just mounting on to a chair, which he had fetched out of the church; so that he might reach the brass ring at the bottom of the first candelabrum. Seizing this, he gave the whole thing a violent twist, and, as it was hanging by a chain from the roof, it span round like a top, sending the grease, with half the candles themselves, flying in every direction. Then the silly lad stood down on the pavement of the sanctuary and endeavoured with his extinguisher to catch the remaining candles one by one as they came swinging round. Nearly all of them were lying on the ground when he had

finished, while the people who remained behind to hear the organ enjoyed such a display of "ritualism" as they had never witnessed before.

Poor Fred was very penitent after this lamentable exhibition; and he set himself with ardour to study Church matters generally, and those pertaining to the duties of a Server in particular. He became quite an authority upon what was "correct" in all kinds of ceremonial; though his learning in this direction got a nasty knock when, the evening before the next Whitsunday, two of his fellow-servers discovered him lovingly engaged in fitting *red candles* in his precious candelabra; because, forsooth, the text-books gave red as the correct colour to be used in church for Whitsuntide!

It was another old choir-boy acting as a Server, in that same parish, who seemed to be particularly slow in the uptake. He received endless lessons in what to do while assisting at the altar; till at last he was considered competent. A week-day early Celebration was chosen as the first for him to help at; the vicar himself, who had done his best to instruct the lad, taking the Service.

When the vestry prayer had been said, it occurred to the vicar to ask: "Is everything quite ready in church, Harry? Are the candles lighted?"

"No, Sir, I'm awfully sorry," replied the Server, "I've quite forgotten the candles."

"Well, be quick then!" urged the vicar. "Get a taper, and light them at once!"

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This done, they both proceeded into the church, where, to the vicar's dismay, he found that intelligent Server, after all his coaching, had lit *the two candles in the pulpit!*

Some years later, in a church where we had a whole band of Servers—mostly choir-boys of ancient days—one of them was visited by an awful Nemesis.

It was Christmas Eve, and this Server was lamenting the fact that the rector could not be induced to have a Midnight Eucharist that night, according to the ancient custom of Christendom. So keen was he on attending such a Service that he determined to go to the neighbouring Roman Church for once. This he ventured to suggest to one or two other of the Servers, only to get jumped upon by them for his disloyalty. He appeared to be set upon it all the same; though he feared that, after keeping such late hours as this would entail, he might over-sleep in the morning, when he was down to Serve at six o'clock.

A friend with whom this young fellow was spending the evening suggested that he should use an alarm clock, and as he didn't possess such a thing, he lent him his own, which was duly wound up and set for five o'clock. The visitor then left for the Midnight Mass.

Some qualms of conscience seized the wandering Server when he found himself kneeling in such an unaccustomed place, and he felt that the eyes of

many who knew him well were fixed upon him in wonder. However, he decided to see the thing through, and, though feeling anything but comfortable, did his best to enter into the Service.

Alas for the calm composure which he was trying to assume ! Immediately after the Consecration, when everything was hushed in silence, our friend, in attempting quietly to extricate his handkerchief from his overcoat pocket, where it seemed to have got entangled with sundry other things, must have moved some catch upon the borrowed clock ; for the alarm went off then and there with a terrible racket !

Such dire confusion covered the poor youth that he had to steal out in disgrace ; and we heard no more of his leaving his own church at Christmas-time.

In one of the district churches of a parish where I was once vicar, an old chorister, who was for the first time acting as a Server, came to me after Evensong, and said in a plaintive tone : " If you please, Sir, I can't find the doubter."

" Can't find the doubter, my boy ? " I questioned—thinking of someone in religious difficulty, who might have asked to see me, and then thought better of it and disappeared. " Whom do you mean ? "

" Why, the thing you put out the candles with, Sir," he replied, quite innocently.

Then I tumbled to it that, according to this lad's dictionary, to " put out " was to " dout " ; so that an extinguisher might be called a " douter."

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A Quiet Day I once conducted lives in my memory.

After the early morning Service, the Server—again an old choir-boy, but unaccustomed to such days—asked if there were anything I would like prepared before the first address. All that I needed was to have the Glastonbury chair, which I saw standing in the vestry, taken out into the church, and put ready for me at the chancel gates ; so that, according to custom, I might talk to the congregation after the fashion of a Sunday-School or Bible-Class teacher.

Imagine my disturbed state of feelings, when I came out to take the meditation, and found the chair placed *facing the altar*. What the Server thought I was going to do with it in that position I cannot tell ; but I know that, throughout the Service, even though my only desire was to be most serious, I could not shake my mind free from the vision of the game of “ trains ” we used to play in the nursery, with myself in front as the engine.

I feel impelled here to relate one other unusual Quiet Day incident, though that Server had nothing to do with it—it happened years before.

After the second address, the rector asked me to find my way to the rectory, while he went to the school, where those who were keeping the Day were lunching together. He wished to see that everything was in order there before he came up to the house to lunch with me.

You who are accustomed to such days as I am

describing will know that it is usual to have some devotional book read during the meals ; because the rule of silence from ordinary conversation is observed ; and knowing this you will appreciate the sequel.

The rector came into his study convulsed with laughter ; so much so that I ventured to remark that he didn't look exactly like the parson of a parish in which a Quiet Day was being kept.

" Nor will you, my dear friend," said he, " after I've told you what has just happened. When I got to the school, I found the company waiting for me to say Grace ; but before doing so I went across the room to Smith (one of the curates of the parish), who had offered to read during lunch ; and what book do you think he had brought for that purpose ? "

" I can't say," I replied, " perhaps the Life of one of the Saints."

" Not a bit of it ! " said the rector, bubbling over again ; " Smith has evidently never been at a Quiet Day before, because he was standing ready to start reading Jerome K. Jerome's *Three men in a Boat* ! "

" And after ! " Already I have remarked how many gentlemen of the choir find themselves in their exalted position " after " some years of apprenticeship as boys. It is rather an exception to find a senior member who has not previously been a choir-boy.

There are many stories I might relate about

choir-men, but this is hardly the place to do so. I cannot refrain, however, from telling just one.

I was then Precentor at the central church of a big town; and the bishop, in order to recognise, as well as to stimulate, the splendid diocesan spirit shown throughout that district, arranged a united Service for all the Church Workers of the different parishes, on the occasion of his annual special visit to the Deanery. The first of these gatherings was held in our own church, and the choir was made up of the gentlemen from all the church choirs in the borough—a goodly array of men, who led the singing of the great congregation with telling effect.

It happened that on the Sunday before this united Service I was preaching at a church on the outskirts of the town, where I was glad of the opportunity of requesting the choir-men to assemble in the new Parochial Hall, immediately opposite the central parish church, a good half-hour before the Service; so that we might try over with the massed choirs one or two parts of the singing which would go better with a rehearsal beforehand. I reminded them, also, that although tickets were necessary for other Church workers attending the Service, none would be needed by the choir.

I obtained a ready promise that all would be there in good time; because everyone was taking the keenest interest in the event.

The evening arrived, and the gentlemen of the choir I had interviewed met at their own church an hour before the time of the Service, in order to

go down together in the same tram to the centre of the town. On the way, the question went round: "Who knows where St Peter's new Parochial Hall is?"

No one seemed to be quite sure, but all agreed that it must be in St Peter's road; seeing I had explained to them that it was opposite the church. So they got off the car at the end of that road, where they inquired of the policeman on point duty, who courteously directed them "about a couple of hundred yards along on the right-hand side: place all lighted up."

Following this advice, the choir-men arrived at the hall; only to find that they had been sent to the premier Picture Palace of the town: hardly the place for the Church choirs of the neighbourhood to be meeting and robing in!

The men forthwith voted the constable an ignoramus, and they were going on past the hall, when one of them suddenly remembered it was in that very building the choirs had vested for a Choral Festival at the same church only a few months before; but they had met then in the Gymnasium underneath the Picture Palace.

Robert evidently wasn't so far wrong after all; so down the steps they went, and in at the big door below, where an attendant demanded their tickets. They explained that choir members needed no tickets. The official said he had received no such instructions; he therefore asked who they were, and then went off to inquire whether they might

be admitted. In a few moments he returned, saying that it was quite all right.

Inside the hall to their astonishment they found the whole company of men seated at a substantial meal, in which they were bidden to join. For a moment they thought it strange that nothing had been said about this beforehand ; but then they remembered that the Mayor, whom they saw presiding, was one of the leading choir-men at the parish church opposite, and that he was very fond of entertaining his brother choristers. So they gathered at once that he had seized the present opportunity of meeting the members of the other choirs at supper before the united Service.

No time was lost by the choir-men who had just arrived ; for they knew there was still the short rehearsal to be got in before they went across to the church. Nobody else, however, seemed to notice how the time was slipping along ; and at last one of the party ventured to ask at what hour the Service really began—whether or not they had made a mistake in supposing it started at eight o'clock ?

“ What Service is that, then ? ” said the waiter.

“ Why, the Bishop’s Service,” was the reply ; “ the Service that all these choir-men (waving the hand to indicate all who were in the hall) have come to sing at.”

“ Choir-men ? ” muttered the waiter, with a broad grin. “ These aren’t choir-men. Where do you reckon you are ? This show’s got nothing

to do with any Bishop's Service, so far as I know : it's *the Mayor's supper to the cabmen of the town !* "

Then the bewildered choristers discovered that St Peter's Hall was round the corner, on the other side of the church, and that they'd less than five minutes in which to get there and robe.

One of the party went to apologize to the Mayor, who had been secretly enjoying the situation all the while ; but he hurried them off with the assurance that they had been most welcome, and his sincere regret that it would be impossible for him to be with them that night.

In the meantime, over at the proper hall, our rehearsal had passed off well, and the choristers were formed up in order, for Procession across to the church ; when, at the last moment, the good fellows who had met with such an extraordinary adventure, rushed in—out of breath, and flushed with hurrying.

After the Service the delinquents swarmed around me to explain—all at the same time. By degrees I understood their unique experience, as I have just related it ; and I promised to convey to the bishop their humble apology for having kept his lordship waiting while they vested and got into line.

I never heard a bishop laugh more heartily.

In all the years that have gone by since you and I were choir-boys (if you, good reader, ever had that privilege), what a happy memory those chorister days have been ! If we could see our

time over again, we would make no other choice for boyhood.

What good friends we found then ! And they have stuck to us, through a long life, it may be. We were thrown so much together that our friendship was bound to ripen in many cases into a rare intimacy.

And, in spite of all the trouble we managed to be to them, we really loved the clergy, the organists, and others who had so much to do with us then. I am confident they loved us too—all of them, at least, who were worth their salt and were in love with their work.

Few things in life are so pleasant as the affection which springs up between the boys and those who have charge of them in the choir. Every choir-master and precentor must have experienced this a hundred times, but the first marked evidence of it that came my way was refreshing indeed.

One Sunday morning I was astonished at the visit of two young men, whom I did not recognize for a few moments ; but I soon found they had been big lads in the choir during my first curacy some years before. I had left that parish to go to the North of England ; and these young men, who were working-fellows, with very little spare cash, finding that they had ten days' holiday allowed them from their factory, and hearing that I had come back to the sunny South, had walked more than seventy miles to see me ; sleeping under

hedges or in outhouses on the way. They looked for nothing more than the pleasure of the meeting, and the chance of seeing me in my new church; though it was a delight to give them a shake-down for the night, before they set off quite contentedly the next morning on their long walk of another seventy miles home.

If these old choir-boys had been particular chums of mine I should not have been so surprised; but they weren't—as a matter of fact they had caused me a deal of trouble while I was trying to look after them, and I should have imagined them to be the most unlikely boys to set out on such an errand. That made my appreciation of it all the keener.

On another occasion I went to preach in a church, where some years before I had been working; and after the Sung Eucharist I was talking in the vestry with one of the choir-men, who had been a boy there in my day, but who was now advanced to the age of sporting a moustache.

While we were speaking of old times, my friend accidentally let fall the book of devotion he was trying to put into his pocket, and when he recovered it he did not notice that a slip of paper had dropped out. As I leant down to pick this up, I could not help seeing the words at the top—*Friends to pray for*. And there, standing first on the list, was my own name.

For nearly ten years that dear fellow had been

praying for me regularly by name, and I'd never guessed it. What a bond of affection suddenly to find uniting you to another ! So, Cheer O ! when sometimes you're feeling down ! There may be many golden links like that, which you've never dreamt of.

These things happened, of course, some years before the Great War came to call up thousands of old choir-boys from all parts of the Empire, and largely to deplete our choirs of their senior members.¹ Yet the War has served to show, amongst other deep things, what a lasting impression is made in early years upon the lives of choristers.

I am writing this particular paragraph on a Sunday evening, and only an hour or so ago there appeared a soldier in the vestry of the church just before Evensong, asking if he could be of any help in the singing ; because he was a choir-man when at his own home. I have quite lost count of the number of Army and Navy men who have done that at the different churches I have helped in during the War.

" I used to be a choir-boy in the old church at home, Sir," has been said to me literally dozens of times by Tommies in the club, or the church, or the hospital ; and always with a note of pride,

¹ Cathedrals and other churches have been alike in this respect. For instance, at the beginning of the fourth year of the War, I saw the following note in the morning paper : " Evensong at Rochester Cathedral is being sung by boys, with a boy at the organ, all the men being at the War."

if sometimes also with a suspicion of regret that something had come to break off the old special connection with the Church.

How many messages have been sent home from the Front, do you think, to parsons, and organists, and chums in the old church, remembered with the last thoughts of dying choir-boys of years ago ?

Many are the cases recorded in this War of men sorely wounded, alone, and sometimes half-conscious upon the battlefield, who have been found repeating the Psalms to themselves as a comfort in their agony near the gate of death.

Mark the significance of that ! In moments of untold stress such as those, men can fall back only upon what has become so much part of themselves as to be almost second nature. And to whom have the Psalms grown to be such old, old friends that they can be called up to aid in an hour of such dire necessity, think you, more than to those who have made their words familiar by singing them continually in the old choir ?

But we'll look away from the field of death to a more smiling picture.

"And after !" One day there were signs of life in an empty shop opposite the church where I was then serving, and I called to see who might be moving in. A pleasant young man gave me a cordial welcome, as he explained that he had recently been married and was starting there a jeweller's business. I wished him every success,

and we fell to chatting over old days, when I discovered that he had been a choir-boy.

"Then you never returned to the choir after you were grown up?" I asked.

"No!" he replied. "I left home to be apprenticed just when my boy's voice had broken. The first town I went to I had to leave rather hurriedly—oddly enough through a Church Service—and then I fought shy of offering myself in a strange place; till somehow I slipped out of choir singing altogether."

"And how was it that a Church Service caused you to leave the firm you had gone to be apprenticed to?" I asked, feeling from the twinkle in his eye, when he spoke about this, that there was something else worth hearing.

"Well, it was this way," said my newly-met friend. "My father sent me to an old acquaintance of his, to see if we mutually suited each other, with a view to apprenticeship; and I expect, if it hadn't been for the little incident I will tell you about, the arrangement would have satisfied us all.

"Before my trial time was up, we reached the last day of the old year. That morning the venerable rector of the parish church came into the shop, and explained how it had distressed him for some years that there was no clock in the tower to strike at the Midnight Service. He said the whole thing seemed to lack point, when he had to announce that it was two minutes to the hour; and then after-

wards, when the congregation had been kneeling in silence, to rise and say that they had now passed into another year.

“ Why it had never occurred to the old gentleman to get one of the ringers to pull the biggest bell twelve times, I don’t know ; but it never had, and it wasn’t for me to chip in then and suggest it ; because they weren’t talking to me : I was only listening behind the counter in another part of the shop.

“ What the old rector had come to inquire was, whether it were possible for us to fix up in the church, out of sight, behind some pillar near the pulpit, a clock which would strike solemnly, and usher in the New Year. He was anxious that it should not betray its presence before twelve o’clock ; so he suggested that, although it might be fixed in position at any time during the day, someone should go in and adjust it immediately after eleven that night, before the doors were opened for the actual Service.

“ The rector was assured that everything could be arranged as he wished ; and as soon as he was gone, the ‘ guvnor ’ called me and asked if I had heard what was wanted. When I said that I had, he told me to make myself responsible for the job—select a suitable clock ; take it to the church ; fix it securely in the most convenient place ; set it correctly ; and go in at the last moment to start it.

“ That sort of thing suited me down to the

ground, and I was determined to make the affair a big success. It took me some time to get everything done, but in the end I was satisfied; and when at last I had set the clock going just before the people began to come into the church, I was full of excitement, and decided to stay to the Service, to see the thing properly through.

“There was a touch of superiority in being the only one in that big congregation, except the rector and the verger, who knew of the secret clock; and I sat at the back of the church, to notice if anyone would be startled when the unfamiliar striking began.

“The Service went well, and the old rector’s sermon was most impressive. I got quite a lump in my throat once or twice: he was so touching. Then we all knelt down, and there was a deathly silence. I could feel my heart thumping so hard that I thought the other people in the pew must hear it. It seemed to me more like a quarter of an hour than two minutes; I began to fear the clock had stopped, and would never strike at all.

“But it was all right: on the very stroke of midnight it went off—*Cuckoo! Cuckoo!* twelve mortal times!

“I got the sack for it; and that’s why I left the town hurriedly, without being apprenticed there.”

There was a chum of my own, who, at the same awkward, voice-breaking age, was suddenly plunged into despair about his future. The death of his

father at a critical time in family affairs, meant that he could not think of an Oxford career, with Ordination at the end—the one and only dream of his life. Instead, he was sent to a solicitor's office, where he loathed the work, though he stuck to it pluckily.

One memorable evening we took a long walk together, to talk over aims, ideals, and possibilities of better things than quill driving. Here was my chum's proposition: He was particularly keen on music, and played the piano quite decently. Why shouldn't he see what could be done in the way of organ playing, so that when he was skilful enough to manage a Service, he might obtain a post as organist in one of the small country churches of the district, while he still continued his office work? He could save the money earned in that way for a few years, and then, by keeping up his other studies as well, he might in the end be able to manage a course at a Theological College, and so reach Ordination after all.

Together we went to our organist, and laid the whole plan before him. He was full of interest and sympathy: so much so that he offered on the spot to give, as his contribution to the project, the necessary organ lessons. But he pointed out that the chief difficulty and expense would be to secure a blower; for it would mean a daily organ practice of at least an hour. That point we had anticipated, and we explained that it was just there that I personally thought I might come in with a

bit of help. There we were, then, with everything fixed up!

The next morning we set to work, one at the keyboard and the other at the bellows. You see, the only time we could either of us get quite free was in the early hours of the day; for my chum had to be at his office by nine o'clock, and his evenings were fully taken up with his other studies—as were my own. Another difficulty was the fact that we were then both living about two miles from the church, which meant very early rising, so as to start away from home punctually at six o'clock each morning. Still, there's a delight in being "up against it," especially when you know that a great deal hangs upon the way you stick to it.

But, as the winter drew on, that early morning walk in the dark—often also in the rain or fog, and sometimes in the snow—began to be rather much; so we looked about for any relief that might suggest itself. At length my friend bethought him of someone he knew connected with a famous Congregational Chapel near where we lived; and off we went for another interview. This, too, was successful; for we came away with permission to use the organ in that place of worship any morning.

Here, of course, we found the arrangements of the building very different from anything we had ever been accustomed to, the pulpit being in a commanding position, with the organ behind

it. This led to a novel experiment. A few days after we began work in our new quarters, when we took ten minutes' rest after the first hour's practice, my chum suggested that I should come round and sit in a pew, while he made a trial of preaching to a congregation of one. How serious he was over it ! I thought at first he meant the whole thing as a joke ; but he certainly didn't.

Then, morning by morning we took it in turns to preach one to another from that rostrum ; though I doubt if the doctrines we sometimes taught would have met with the full approval of the Chapel Deacons. But in that very fact there was a distinct relish.

We got fascinated with the exercise, and put some of our best into it. I don't know what my old friend feels about it now, in his teeming parish in the north, but I myself am quite confident that I owe more than a little to that early bit of enthusiasm in the preaching line.

That chum gained his end : he deserved to. He became organist of a little church some ten miles away, and he continued to go there, by special permission, each week-end, all the time of his college career ; so adding grist to the mill.

Another little bit of help I was able to give a chum, long " after " old days, and far away from the old place, was, perhaps, rather more romantic.

I was Precentor at a church in a big city, where it was a pleasant surprise to find this particular friend had settled down in practice as a doctor.

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We used occasionally to meet, though he lived in a distant part of the city.

One day the medico came to see me—full of excitement, and with a great request. He'd fallen violently in love, which was a good thing; only her father wouldn't hear of it, which was a decidedly bad thing. I believe the fond parent had visions of some wealthy merchant for his daughter, and not a struggling doctor—the old story, with the old ending.

The request was that I should marry them quietly, without letting a soul know of it—"just to help an old friend win the best girl in the world." I knew my chum and his worth, and it didn't take long to find that his love was deep and true, or that his choice was of the right sort. She returned his love with interest, and she was of age to please herself; but the old gentleman had a will like steel, and a temper like a squib.

That was enough; and we laid our plans. My friend qualified for the marriage license in the usual way, and the wedding was fixed for 8.30 one lovely summer morning.

The day before, my friend came to say he wasn't at all at ease that the affair would be pulled off without a hitch; he had a sort of feeling the old man was suspicious that something was in the wind.

Under the circumstances I arranged that the happy pair should leave the church by a side door, which led through the school-yards at the back,

and thence to a street behind, where a carriage might be in waiting.

Everything sailed along happily, though I am free to confess it was far harder than I had imagined to keep my mind on the Service, when every moment I was glancing up at the door, expecting to see the irate father storming in to forbid the marriage or to make a great fuss. But, no ! It was perfectly quiet, except for the hum of the traffic in the main road outside, and the laughter of the children playing in the school-grounds at the back.

The Service was finished ; the knot securely tied ; the registers signed ; and the beaming couple conducted, through the puzzled children assembling for school in the playgrounds, to the carriage in the street beyond.

Then I returned to the church ; but as I was crossing it, the western door opened, admitting a gentleman, who was tall and imposing, except that he was flushed and in a pelting hurry. At the entrance to the vestry we met, and he opened fire at once.

“ There has been a secret marriage here this morning, I believe ; and I’ve no doubt you’ve been in the know all the time, like a Jesuit priest, plotting and planning ; scheming to rob a man of his daughter, and to help a young scoundrel run off with a girl who doesn’t know her own mind. I demand to know what has taken place, and where my daughter is at this moment. I’ll have the Law

at you, Sir—the utmost the Law can bring upon you ! ” Then he was obliged to stop, being quite out of breath, and apparently at a loss for anything more fearful to say.

Don't for a moment imagine that I have any special qualification for handling difficult people ; but when you happen to know that you're absolutely secure in your own position, and your opponent is labouring under the tremendous disadvantage of having completely lost his temper—then obviously you'll come out on top, if only you can manage to keep calm and not talk without thinking. So, I said as quietly as I could, while I held the door open : “ Shall we speak about the matter in the vestry ? ”

There I felt freer to indulge in such a conversation, and continued : “ Well, Sir, you come in this violent fashion to an utter stranger, accusing him of all sorts of dreadful things you can't prove ; offering him the rudest remarks that are none of them called for ; demanding of him any amount of information he isn't in the least obliged to give ; and threatening him with all kinds of penalties you haven't the ghost of a chance of bringing upon him. Do you think that's the most diplomatic way of getting anything at all out of him ? ”

“ My words are fully justified,” answered the still angry father, “ and no more than you yourself would use, if you had been treated as I have. I'm determined to force you to tell me the whereabouts

of my daughter, and to make you pay dearly for your own part in this underhand and deceitful performance."

"Very well, then, my dear Sir," said I. "There is nothing more for me to do but to bid you good-morning, while you go and set in motion that Law you speak of. As a rule it isn't particularly easy to get very heavy damages out of a person who performs a perfectly legal act in a perfectly legal way ; but if that's the sort of race you are at all keen on risking your cash upon, I daresay the lawyers will give you a pretty good run for your money." With that I opened the vestry door, and stood ready for my visitor to depart.

For a moment it seemed to hang in the balance which would get the better of the sorely tried gentleman—his bad temper or his better nature ; and I half anticipated a violent personal assault on his part. But the flash in his eyes died down as I looked straight into them, and I could see that there was a chance of his coming round to reason. Obviously he was most anxious to find out at once what had really happened, and where his daughter then was ; neither of which bits of information he could get now, unless he were at least prepared to ask politely for it. A few seconds he stood irresolute ; then he motioned me to close the door again.

"Perhaps I was a little too heated in my remarks," he said, "but I feel I have a perfect right to ask what that young scoundrel has done

with my daughter ; and that in all common fairness it is your duty to tell me, if you know."

"Then let us quite clearly understand one another," I replied. "You have twice referred to a man I have known for many years to be one of the most honourable, reliable, and charming of fellows, as a 'scoundrel.' Brown and I have been the firmest of friends since boyhood, and I refuse to stand by and hear him called by such a name. That man has, not only the cleverness, but the grit and determination to carve out a splendid position for himself in his profession ; and I should imagine your daughter would be exactly the woman to stand by him and see him through any difficulty he might meet by the way, especially in these early years, while he is struggling to make a name."

"Why, the very fact that my friend set his heart on winning your daughter and marrying her at all costs—which he did this morning without the least shadow of doubt—is evidence of the stuff the man is made of ; and as soon as you get to know him better, my dear Sir, you'll be proud to call him your son."

My enthusiasm for my chum had carried me away, but it appeared to have carried away his father-in-law too ; for the good man suddenly seized me by the hand and shook it heartily.

"I admire you for sticking up for your friend, Sir ; and I apologize for anything I may have said that was unfair to him. If the truth be told,

I suppose I have been more angry because my daughter refused to make the match I myself desired for her, than with the man of her own choice. In my heart of hearts I've known that all along. I discovered the plan for this secret wedding—well, it doesn't matter how; and I knew quite well that if I attempted to stop it I should only be running my head against a brick wall."

"What I actually set out this morning to do was to come to the wedding, without my daughter's knowledge, and to give her and her husband my forgiveness and blessing afterwards; but as soon as I entered the church and saw there the little arrangements usually made for marriages, I guessed that I had mistaken the time and arrived too late. In a moment my abominably quick temper was aroused, and I attacked you in the ungentlemanly way I did. I am exceedingly sorry. And now, if you accept my apology, I shall be very grateful if you will tell me where the couple have gone; so that I may write and explain matters to them."

I was ready to respond to the good nature of my now changed visitor, but I said that, as I had definitely promised not to tell anyone where my friend and his bride were gone, I would rather write and let him know what had happened; so that the happy couple might divulge their own whereabouts.

"I appreciate your difficulty," said the merchant

—for such he was, “in fact, I have in a way anticipated it. Before I left the house this morning I wrote a letter to my daughter, telling her that I no longer raised any objection to her marriage; and I brought this letter with me, so that I might post it to her immediately, if by any chance I was too late to see her personally. And, as things have turned out, I think I cannot do better than ask you to address the envelope and post it for me, as soon as you leave the church.”

I undertook the small commission with a glad heart, and after a few most cordial words together, the bride’s father and I parted, the best of friends.

As soon as the old gentleman was out of sight, I hailed a cab, and asked the driver to make his best pace to the hotel I knew the happy pair were having their breakfast at; so that if possible I might catch them and deliver the letter with its good news before they set off on their short honeymoon.

I was lucky to arrive in the nick of time, to the astonishment of my friend and his bride. Which of the three of us was most eager to discover what were the actual contents of that note I shouldn’t care to say; but I’m sure we were all equally amazed to find that inside the letter was enclosed a cheque for one hundred pounds!

The couple missed the train, and went by one some hours later; but when in the end they did

start for the station, it was from the bride's old home, and not from the hotel.

And, lastly (even in writing, you see, I can't forget that I'm still a parson, and must therefore get in the "lastly" somehow), let me tell briefly of the unexpected yet perfectly delightful time—between eight and nine long, happy years—that I was permitted to spend in harness with the most intimate friend of choir-boy times.

The day came when this chum and I passed out of the chancel of the old church for the last time as chorister-boys, and separated for our life's work: he to become the pupil of the great organist of our most famous cathedral, and I to the training which ended in my Ordination.

So the years raced by, while ever and anon we met; though sometimes at long intervals, when our work lay in distant parts of the country. Then, apparently by the merest coincidence, the streams of our two lives joined up again, and we found ourselves together once more, as Organist and Precentor respectively, in a church which, strangely enough, had always been the goal of the ambition of us both. Here indeed was incentive and scope for the highest that we were capable of putting forth; and I am confident that no two men ever experienced the joy of companionship to a greater degree than we did during those years of work, which, though at times most difficult, always claimed our affection as well as our best endeavour, because it was the work we loved most

in the world, and it could be carried on thus under such ideal conditions.

Through all this time together, especially in our dealing with the choir-boys now under our joint care, the memory of the days long years ago would brighten the task, and perhaps help to keep us young, and sympathetic with our lads.

If they could have guessed—those boys—what was often passing through our minds as we had to appear stern and severe over some fault or frolic of theirs! If they could have known of the hearty laughter which sometimes followed their departure from the practice room! Or, more terrible still, if they could only have heard our criticism of the bungling of their plans, and of their getting so little out of the adventure they had embarked upon: comparing their whole performance with what we ourselves would have done, and the way we would have worked it, in the good old days!

One evening in particular I remember leaving the church with my old friend, after a boys' rehearsal, during the big undertaking of the rebuilding of organ, vestries, and practice room. We stood for a few moments together, and looked around on the maze of scaffolding; the ladders leading to different heights and depths; the stacks of bricks, and stone, and planks; the lakes of white plaster, and heaps of mortar. I suppose the same thoughts filled both our minds, for it

needed only one, short, quiet, understanding remark to convey to each other the whole of our silent meditation: "If only they had given *us* this chance, when *we* were choir-boys, eh, old chap?"

That was enough to set our memories and our tongues running—for we were spending the rest of the evening together—and perhaps the raciest experience we recalled and recounted that night was one which befell us over twenty years before.

By a strange chance, when I was then visiting the old town of my choir-boy days, who should I run into in one of the principal streets but this very chum about whom I am writing. He was resplendent in a tall silk hat and a morning coat, while I was not a little proud of my newly-acquired wide-awake and clerical surtout, for it was shortly after my Ordination.

How delighted we were at the unexpected meeting! We seemed like boys again, comparing experiences and adventures, and talking over plans and projects.

Then happened the really astounding part of the coincidence of that day. As we turned a sharp corner, who should we meet face to face but a third old chorister chum, who was now also in Orders, but working, so far as we could have said a moment before, somewhere in the wastes of Canada! Passers-by turned and stared at the excitement of our mutual greetings.

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We walked on slowly, none of us seeming to have any definite objective: we were all so surprised at the turn of events which had brought us together in that remarkable fashion. It wasn't till perhaps a quarter of an hour afterwards that one of us looked up and remarked: "I say, you fellows, where on earth are we supposed to be going? This side street doesn't lead anywhere in particular."

Sure enough we had wandered altogether off the main road, and it took a moment or two to see where we were. Then it seemed to dawn on all of us at the same time that we had actually stumbled upon the scene of one of our favourite, though reprehensible, pastimes as boys; for beside us were the stables of a large local factory, and I believe it was I (at any rate the other two have since put the blame of the whole affair on my shoulders) who suddenly said:

"Do you remember that bell over there—you two? I wonder if the same fat old stableman is inside still, and whether he goes on using the same awful language when wicked little boys ring his bell and then bolt! Are you game to try and see, anyway?"

"What in the name of all that's reasonable are you suggesting?" asked the other parson. "Have some respect for the cloth; and don't forget we're no longer kids! What do you think the general public would say at seeing three apparently respectable gentlemen, and two of

them clergy, deliberately ring a bell, and then run away? Is that what you're suggesting, old boy?"

"Not for one moment," I replied, unabashed. "I don't want the general public to see anything at all, nor the respectable gentlemen to do any running. But it would be nothing short of criminal if we didn't mark this auspicious occasion in some unique and distinctive way. So, what I seriously propose is that I pull that bell for all I'm worth, as we walk quietly by it. Then, after we've gone on about a dozen paces, we can turn right-about-face and stroll slowly back again. By that time, if old Charlie is still pretending to work inside there, he'll have got to the door. Are you sporting enough to try it?"

They were: of course they were! I knew my men. So, with a quick glance up and down the street, to see that the coast was clear, we put the plan into instant execution; and, sure enough, as soon as we were turned about and were drawing near the fatal door again, open it flew, and out rushed the same red-faced old blunderer, using the same ghastly language.

When he saw two clergy with a city gentleman approaching, the flow of his oratory dried up with a jerk; and, being nearest to him, I inquired if he wanted anyone, or if there were anything we could do for him.

"No, Sir, thank you!" he replied. "Some — boys have been ringing this bell again, Sir. I'll

flay the little ——'s (pardon the expression, Sir !) when I can lay my hands on 'em."

I remarked that we hadn't seen any boys in the street since we entered it, and asked if he didn't think he'd been mistaken.

"Mistaken, Sir ? Certainly not ! Why, look and see for yourselves : the bell is still swinging over there !" We looked, and it was even so.

We agreed with Charlie that it was a most mysterious thing that the youngsters should have nipped up and back out of sight again so quickly.

One of us asked whether there were any particular boys that he suspected ; and the old man confessed that at that hour of the day he couldn't imagine who they might be, but that if it had been in the evening he would at once have suggested the choir-boys of St ——'s church.

We all expressed our surprise that choristers should ever dream of doing such an unseemly thing. His reply was nectar to us—sweet, luscious nectar. If only he had guessed to whom he was talking ! He said :

"You're evidently strangers in these parts, gentlemen ! The choir-boys of St ——'s may consider themselves young gents ; but they're the most confoundedest lot I've ever come across ; and I've known 'em these many years !"

We asked innocently if the church of which he spake was the one with the tall spire, which could be seen from the end of the street : and, finding

that it was, we said we would make it our business to look in and see such a famous place. And we left old Charlie with the expression of our regret that he should be so harrassed by

THOSE DREADFUL CHOIR-BOYS !

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